Center on Educational Governance

STRATEGY BRIEF

District-wide School Reform: Strategizing for Early Success

BY ANDREW THOMAS & PRISCILLA WOHLSTETTER

Introduction

To improve student achievement through district-wide instructional or curricular reforms, superintendents and district administrators face substantial challenges: Sparse financial and human resources, resistance from staff, or technical problems. Coordinating the district office and school sites also can be difficult to accomplish, but not impossible.

This brief presents promising reform strategies from four urban districts in Southern California that serve high numbers of economically disadvantaged minority students. These districts – Desert Sands Unified, Inglewood Unified, Lennox and Pomona Unified – are part of the Urban Public School Districts Reform Initiative (USDRI), launched by the Weingart Foundation in 2006. Each district, already engaged in positive academic improvement efforts, was awarded a three-year implementation grant for specific projects related to its overall reform plans.

In this brief, members of the Initiative's research team from the Center on Educational Governance (CEG) at the University of Southern California discuss the early lessons learned from the Urban School Districts Reform Initiative. The research team helped the Weingart Foundation develop the Initiative and select the four districts. During the grant period, the research team facilitated a collaborative learning community among the four districts and evaluated common threads of implementation across the four reform projects.

URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS REFORM INITIATIVE (USDRI)

To help Southern California public schools provide rich learning opportunities for students, the Weingart Foundation launched the Urban School Districts Reform Initiative in 2006, with the objective of supporting targeted reform efforts within districts with effective plans for change. Accordingly, the Initiative's goal is to improve education by supporting sustainable reforms in districts educating high numbers of low-income students.

The Initiative was informed by research conducted by the Center on Educational Governance at the Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California (USC). Center researchers used an interdisciplinary approach to studying the educational issues posed by diverse urban communities.

Targeting Southern California public school districts that enroll fewer than 35,000 students, the Urban School Districts Reform Initiative launched with the identification of four districts serving economically disadvantaged students: Desert Sands Unified School District, Inglewood Unified School District, Lennox School District and Pomona Unified School District. Each district, already engaged in promising academic improvement efforts, was awarded a three-year implementation grant for specific projects related to its overall reform plans.

The Initiative also sponsors a collaborative learning community among the four districts, facilitated by USC; as well as various evaluation activities intended to elicit lessons learned by each and across the Initiative as a whole.

USDRI SELECTION CRITERIA

Trend over time of increasing student achievement

Located in Southern California

Size: 5,000 to 35,000 students

Urban communities (majority minority, at-risk, high poverty)

LAYING THE FOUNDATION:
A FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY SUCCESS

Reform strategy — a systematic plan for improved student achievement — consists of a coherent set of actions that is consciously implemented, adapted, monitored and evaluated.

The four school districts identified their own areas for improvement, designed targeted reforms and adopted various approaches to implementation. Although the reforms varied in content and approach, each employed a broadly similar two-part reform strategy. Part one, *strategic positioning*, shaped the content, scope, and scale of the reform; identified the role of the superintendent in this specific reform project; and identified and shaped the role of the reform champion as a person generally separate and apart from the superintendent. Taking the time to get the strategic positioning right worked against the natural desire to move as quickly as possible on the reform, but ultimately enhanced the likely success of the reform initiative. Part two, *strategic implementation,* was all about execution – retaining an adequate level of focus on the reform's definition, boundaries and objectives, pacing the execution of the reform through different stages and maintaining communication flows among all stakeholders.

*The first part of the framework is **strategic positioning**, which includes:*

- **Suitability:** How well does the reform conform to the mission and local district context but, at the same time, move the district to a new, different, and more productive level of performance?
- **Superintendent leadership:** Is the superintendent personally involved in curriculum and instruction issues, actively using student-relevant information to guide reform efforts, while avoiding the problems that come from exclusively top-down management and micromanagement?
- **Reform champion:** Is there a skilled, adequately resourced champion in some part of the organization who keeps the reform on track while broadening the commitment to the reform beyond a few?

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

District	Enrollment	% Free and Reduced Lunch	% Minority (non-white)	% ELL
Desert Sands Unified	28,775	55.9	72.9	23.5
Inglewood Unified	15,234	63.3	99.6	30.3
Lennox School District	7,478	89.4	99.6	59.3
Pomona Unified	30,779	77.4	94.1	43.4

Source: Enrollment and percent minority information from California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) School Information Form (SIF) http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/; percent free and reduced lunch and ELL from API Growth File, California Department of Education http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/

DISTRICT CHARACTERISTICS AND REFORM FOCUS (2007 – 2008)

District	Number and Types of Schools	Reform Project
Desert Sands Unified	20 Elementary 8 Middle 7 High	Increase classroom computer usage
Inglewood Unified	10 Elementary 3 K–8 2 Middle 4 High	Professional development in mathematics for site administrators and teachers
Lennox School District	5 Elementary 1 Middle 1 Charter High	After-school program for English language learners
Pomona Unified	26 Elementary 6 Middle 6 High	Principal evaluation and accountability

[1] Suitability

Does the reform's content align and integrate with the district's mission, its strategic plan and its context? At the same time, does it pursue an ambitious agenda designed to alter and improve district operations and ultimately student performance? Suitability determines the reform's potential success and how various constituents greet the reform.

Each of the four districts chose projects that addressed a fundamental and high priority. At the same time, each initiative was framed to fit well within its mission and local district context and to show that there were multiple ways to achieve that fit. Desert Sands used USDRI funds to accelerate a technology initiative – increased computer usage in classrooms – that had been written into the district strategic plan since 1993. The superintendent regularly updated the strategic plan with her board and administration; it became an active, living document guiding the district's work. "The Weingart grant helped us move ahead faster in an area where we were already going," the project lead said. "Our implementation of the initiative is not in isolation. From the beginning we saw this as part of the continuous process that we have with the master plan and strategic planning."

Lennox built a new toolbox to fix an old problem: Some persistent English-language learners showed little academic improvement despite numerous interventions. "For many, many years we received feedback that some children who have been in the district for four, five, six years still don't have the language skills in order to succeed in middle school," the deputy superintendent said. The after-school reform project resonated well with educators (and students) from the classroom to the district level, while strengthening existing "whole child" initiatives. The project supported and enhanced a variety of ELL work throughout the district.

The other two districts started projects from scratch, aligning them with existing district programs and priorities. Inglewood had focused for years on improving reading and writing performance, but had never systematically addressed low secondary school math achievement. The superintendent, who had a background in mathematics, recognized the need to build instructional leadership capacity at the principal level. "School leaders were very uncomfortable observing mathematics instruction in classrooms," a project leader said. "It was always the last thing on their list to do." Inglewood's math initiative was distinctive and new, yet its methods conformed well to an ongoing district-wide push to reorganize schools around professional learning communities and expand the use of data-driven instructional decision making.

Each of the four districts chose projects that addressed a fundamental and high priority. At the same time, each initiative was framed to fit well within its mission and local district context and to show that there were multiple ways to achieve that fit.

Pomona's superintendent knew that principal evaluation and accountability had not been addressed for many years; she had previously served for 5 1/2 years as the district's chief academic officer. So while she prioritized the introduction of a new evaluation system, she wanted to "try to focus the work not around the adults, but around our mission and our vision." The project fit a key component of the district's vision statement: Responsibility. More fundamentally, it addressed a "weak link" in overall district governance; so did a principal coaching program run by an outside contractor, which was brought into alignment with the principal evaluation tool to achieve coherence and to lead to more effective implementation of educational priorities.

[2] Superintendent Leadership

Superintendents in the four districts all played a relatively hands-on role in leading the reforms without micromanaging the people charged with the responsibility to carry them out. They were active in "pushing these initiatives" and "driving results," but at the same time didn't want to "see the sausage being made." This "high accountability, high support" approach produced results. One project lead said of her superintendent: "We admire her so much, we'll do anything – I don't care if it's working 15, 18 hours a day – to get this done." How did the superintendents strike this balance? In two ways: They personally oversaw the overall development of the related curricular and instructional strategies, and they secured, controlled and used student achievement and related data.

Inglewood's superintendent targeted mathematics improvement and worked closely with the CEG research team to design the district reform. She hired the professional development team and recruited a high-school principal with a mathematics background to work at the district headquarters. Although she remained involved through daily updates and campus visits, the bulk of the work was carried out by others.

Superintendents also drove the creation of content-based and benchmarking assessments that sought the root causes of failure for specific student groups. Two superintendents spoke of the necessity to secure reliable data on student achievement in math and language arts, especially for English-language learners. In response, district assessments were developed to serve both diagnostic and benchmarking needs; results were sent directly to the superintendent, who could use the data to drive planning meetings with school and district administrators.

After reviewing these data, the superintendent in Inglewood and her leadership team developed weekly pacing plans for their math teachers. She also grouped the district's elementary, middle, and high schools into "feeder patterns," to facilitate cross-school communication and to connect math instruction from grade to grade.

Pomona Unified's superintendent kept a notebook of test scores, evaluations and memos from each school in the district that she brought on site visits. This helped her monitor how the school addresses student needs that have emerged from district assessments. Access to detailed student data helped the superintendent scrutinize all principals' instructional decisions. With school-site teacher and administrator evaluations in hand, she could hold staff accountable for their school-wide goals. She spoke specifically about the multiple forms of information that she and her cabinet found useful to guide decisions: Student achievement data, as expected, but also community perceptions of schools and student satisfaction surveys.

On the whole, the superintendents placed a strong emphasis on using various forms of district data to guide decisions, from district goals and assessments to the oversight of school administrators.

Desert Sands created benchmark assessments by subject area—rather than state and national assessments exclusively—in its effort to use multiple performance measures. Added to the district's central database, these benchmarks guided reform decisions and enhanced existing measures of student performance, such as report cards, teacher-generated tests and state assessments.

On the whole, the superintendents placed a strong emphasis on using various forms of district data to guide decisions, from district goals and assessments to the oversight of school administrators. Behaviors that supported information gathering also contributed to above-average involvement in curriculum and instruction when compared to the conventional role of superintendents. Their personal involvement in the reform projects served two functions: It signaled to others the superintendent's high valuation of the reform, and it facilitated the work of others with more direct responsibility for implementation.

[3] Reform Champions

Each of the four district-wide reforms had reform champions or advocates who functioned as the day-to-day leaders of the project and the subject-matter experts. They held various positions at their districts, from superintendent (in one case) to subject-matter specialist. At Lennox, the reform champion was a former bilingual teacher who now worked in the district office as an English-language development intervention specialist. Desert Sands' champion was the district-wide director of information technology. Two district administrators, both former principals (one with elementary and the other with secondary experience), were Pomona's choice. Colleagues described these champions as "the glue that keeps the whole program together."

Reform champions are people with skills, competence and experience in the reform's content area as well as across the district.

To lead their reform projects, reform champions must have sufficient decision-making authority and access to adequate resources. They must balance their reform work and regular work, working both within their areas of expertise and across the district. Pomona's champions, also members of the superintendent's cabinet, faced a scheduling challenge early on. They often were in the field meeting with principals when directors' meetings were being held in the district office. With access to the superintendent, the reform champions could request that directors' meetings be rescheduled to the afternoon. Also noteworthy: As the reform began to involve more Pomona schools, the reform champions could appeal to the superintendent for additional staff to carry out site visits. At Lennox, the reform champion had easy access to the district's second-in-command, who said, "[The Project Lead] knows that any time she needs something from me to ask … and then I remove the roadblocks so that she can implement the program."

Reform champions are people with skills, competence and experience in the reform's content area as well as across the district. At Desert Sands, the champion had been the director of information technology for 14 years, serving under several superintendents and many different school board members. "He is very passionate and very visionary, and he gets the nuts-and-bolts people behind him. Sometimes visionaries get out there and nobody knows where they're going," the superintendent said. Since the technology initiative began in 1993, the reform champion has had great success in acquiring resources from federal and state governments as well as private sources.

The reform champion for the Lennox after-school program was a National Board-certified teacher who was passionate about helping the English-language learners in her community. She had taught several elementary grades at different schools, had served on one school's leadership team and had been a lead teacher. Her superintendent spoke of having "tremendous confidence" in her second-language acquisition expertise and her ability to manage the reform effectively. He said, "She's very committed. She's very dependable…She's very skilled in looking for resources and materials and she's very skilled in strategies that work."

Pomona's two reform champions brought many years of leadership-development expertise. One had worked in the district for 35 years as a teacher and vice-principal at one elementary school, then principal at another school in the district. The other had served as a principal for nine years before coming to Pomona to be a high-school principal and program administrator. Arguably, the experience and expertise of both were more important contributors to their success than their formal roles in the organization.

Inglewood didn't have the in-house expertise to carry out the reform, so the superintendent hired several consultants with whom she had worked to supplement her team's capabilities. Nevertheless, the superintendent throughout her tenure continued to serve as the reform champion, the only appointed person across the four districts serving in that role. When the superintendent's contract was not renewed by the school board during the second year of the project, it was at first an open question at this district whether a new reform champion would emerge. The director of secondary instruction subsequently stepped into that role and, according to one observer, was "a darned good leader in the sense that he was principal in this district and he was a good principal and acknowledged to be the most effective principal when it came to math. He's the only principal who was a math teacher and he walks the talk."

The champions of reform in these four districts share a passion for and commitment to their work.

The champions of reform in these four districts share a passion for and commitment to their work. The Desert Sands superintendent called her program leaders "very enthusiastic." She said, "I mean they love what they do and when you watch them…their level of enthusiasm about how important what they do is for the achievement of students translates." At Inglewood, the new champion "definitely cares about math." In Lennox, the program lead is "very passionate about what she's doing."

STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION

Pre-planning enabled the districts to launch their reforms, but strategic positioning was just the first step. Early success also depended on strategic implementation.

As the districts began implementation, their strategies included:

- Retaining a sufficiently clear focus on the reform's original definition, boundaries and objectives, while gradually accepting "blurring" as lessons are learned in the execution phase and as the reform becomes increasingly incorporated into the fabric of the district;
- Taking the time to advance implementation of the reform through sequential stages while being mindful of the value of getting to scale in a timely manner;
- Maintaining communication and information flow among all reform stakeholders while using communication tactics to integrate the reform into the broadly accepted and understood culture of the district.

Once a reform project has been strategically positioned, the first component of strategic implementation is to retain a sharp focus on the reform's original goals and objectives as well as a sensitivity to the impact that achieving these goals and objectives might have throughout the organization. Second, implement the reform in stages as needed, possibly even starting small and, pacing in response to feedback. Third, two-way communication systems ensure smooth information flow between the school sites and district office.

INFORMATION SOURCES

Progress reports from the four districts to the Foundation (twice annually).

Onsite interviews in four districts with key stakeholders (twice annually). Interviewees routinely include superintendent, project lead(s), evaluator and school site educators involved with the reform project.

Community meetings, twice annually, attended by district representatives (superintendent, project lead(s) and evaluator), representatives from the Weingart Foundation and members of the CEG research team.

[1] Retain Focus

It is not enough to state the goals of a reform in a vision statement or planning document. Successful reforms tend to have clear, concrete objectives so while the reform moves forward, participants retain a tangible sense of what they are trying to achieve.

Districts retained focus in two main ways: Aligning the reform projects with the district's mission, the local context, and related district programs; and broadcasting successes and positive feedback.

Desert Sands' superintendent retired shortly after the initiative's launch, but the reform was so entwined with the district's strategic plan that the project didn't falter. The new superintendent attributed the smooth transition to the fact that her team was "pre-organized [with] time frames, next steps." Likewise, when Inglewood started its second year without a superintendent, they benefitted from a "solid, solid plan" that enabled them to "hit the ground running." At Pomona, maintaining clear objectives was a matter of keen interest among all parties. Principals wanted to know the standards on which their performance would be evaluated; the superintendent wanted unambiguous understanding and acceptance of those same standards; and all other stakeholders wanted to understand how those standards affected their work. Only clearly articulated and unambiguously interpreted objectives would result in the ultimate goal: Higher-performing principals running schools with greater student achievement. "We've got to be very clear about the expectations, and we have to have shared expectations," Pomona's superintendent said. She consistently reviewed goals and objectives with her board and her assistant superintendents, holding the latter to the Six Essentials of Leadership she adopted as the district's yardstick of excellence. For her, clarity was a matter of continuous effort and improvement. In the second year, she said, "We're just kind of getting a laser-like focus to it," and "it's about getting deeper…that's how we ensure that the focus remains and we hold people accountable to it."

Districts retained focus in two main ways: aligning the reform projects with the district's mission, the local context, and related district programs; and broadcasting successes and positive feedback.

Second, positive public feedback and early specific successes helped promote visibility of the reform. (Negative feedback was addressed privately.) The superintendent at Desert Sands emphasized the importance of positive public feedback when she said the project leader "does a good job of keeping the goals in front of his staff and then helping teachers and principals at the school sites celebrate the small victories as implementation goes along." Lennox's project lead personally recruited teachers for the first pilot after-school program at an elementary school. When it became hard to attract and retain teachers, she modified the schedule, splitting a four-days weekly teaching commitment

into two days per teacher per week. Moving forward, district officials recognized the importance of positive publicity to increase teacher participation. They widely distributed the after-school program's student newspaper and published positive student outcomes in district and community newsletters. In the second year, recruiting teachers and students became much less difficult.

[2] Advance in Stages

All four districts began their projects on a small, manageable scale and then ramped up to include more participants. This allowed them to respond to feedback and adapt to changing conditions while remaining true to the goals of the reform. Sometimes, feedback came from formal evaluations keyed to established benchmarks. Other feedback was less formal, resulting from classroom observations or conversations with participants at the school sites. In all cases, implementation was "context-sensitive" and rolled out in stages.

All four districts began their projects on a small, manageable scale and then ramped up to include more participants.

Desert Sands' project began with about "600-plus teachers in elementary school from grades K-5." The second year, the emphasis was on middle schools. The plan also began with the most motivated and interested teachers, expanding as interest grew among the faculty. In this way, officials in Desert Sands could develop training materials and processes as they went along and tailor their training to the specific needs of their teachers. For instance, the project lead realized early on that offering hardware to teachers did not necessarily lead to instructional changes in classrooms.

Lennox began its project with a year-long pilot at one elementary school before expanding to other schools. According to the project lead, this "step-by-step" roll-out schedule allowed them "to not just automatically do what the pilot does, but modify it in ways that are going to be important to allow it to be as successful as possible as we go to the other sites." In addition to having teachers teach two days instead of four, the project added attendance rewards for students to encourage participation. Lennox also had plans to develop their program beyond the period of the grant. Their long-term "goal was to move the project into the after-school program, which is funded forever." To meet this goal, they planned to have the academic director of the district's regular after-school program work with the project lead during the last year of the grant, "so that when it goes to this after-school program you have someone who has learned all of it."

Rather than seeking to change the behavior of all teachers at all schools, the Inglewood project leaders focused on training "cadres" that would serve as change agents at their respective schools.

Pomona phased in principal evaluation and accountability in a different way. In the first year of the grant, a core group of stakeholders, including district principals from all school levels, met several times to develop a rubric for evaluation with which principals would agree and support. At the start of year two, the reform champions began the time-consuming task of working with each principal in the district to begin the evaluation process using the accountability rubric. From this first round of evaluations came benchmark values for each principal's performance. These values allowed the superintendent and her directors to establish performance goals and to begin developing individualized professional development plans for each principal. Building on this first-year experience, the district fine-tuned their evaluation instrument and integrated their principal coaching program with their evaluation system to create more coherence around leadership capacity building in the district. This form of phase-in worked well for two reasons. The strategic pre-planning of the evaluation instrument created "buy in" throughout the district. Just as important, first-year benchmarking enabled district officials to combine separate leadership improvement efforts together under one umbrella to great effect.

Rather than seeking to change the behavior of all teachers at all schools, the Inglewood project leaders focused on training "cadres" that would serve as change agents at their respective schools. According to the project lead, "Our focus on teachers made sense to us. Teachers are the people who keep things going. Plus in Inglewood, there is continuity among teachers: "They stay at the same school for years – they're like cement." The cadres, formed of teachers and assistant principals, attended monthly Saturday meetings on the use of data to improve mathematics achievement. The idea was that teachers would return to their schools and disseminate their new knowledge; the reform would grow in a "viral" fashion. When cadre meeting attendance trailed off during the school year, meetings changed to weekdays after school, several times a month.

[3] Maintain Communication and Information Flow

Information flow and ongoing communication fosters commitment at all levels of the school system. It also offers channels for feedback about reform implementation, which is especially important when implementing the reform in stages.

Information should flow from the school board, district offices and reform leaders down to every participant and school site, and back up again to the board level. Multiple communication channels increase information flow, and all relied on multiple forms—from one superintendent's open-door policy to another's requirement that all associate superintendents write a "Friday letter" to update her on their week's progress. In the four districts, although the school boards mostly maintained some distance from the reform efforts, they were nonetheless kept in the loop. At Desert Sands, a group of long-standing, supportive board members gave the superintendent room to do her job by buffering her from the demands of newer members. In return, the superintendent worked closely with the entire board, keeping them apprised of the initiative's progress. In Inglewood, teachers went directly before the board to present and defend their program.

Information should flow from the school board, district offices and reform leaders down to every participant and school site, and back up again to the board level.

An intrinsic advantage of smaller school districts is their relatively flat organizational structures; the superintendents in the four districts often interacted directly with principals and teachers at their schools. The Inglewood superintendent met "with the staff implementing the project to get updates on how we're progressing with it." She also took it upon herself to hold her administrators "very accountable for attending project meetings." She also saw her role as the person who reported the district's activities not just to the board, but to the larger community. In Lennox, the deputy superintendent described the situation: "Everybody talks…teachers will come to my office and say you know, 'I have this idea—what about it?' and just talk. It's very easy."

At all four districts, administrators in the central office took on leadership roles with the projects, becoming a part of the communication process. The Lennox deputy superintendent said, "I meet with the project lead every week...and also I am in constant communication with the evaluator. As the point person for all the instructional programs for all district schools…my involvement is very direct with the Weingart grant." At Pomona, the two project leads – the directors of elementary and secondary education in the district office – frequently met with principals. One of them reported, "I think we've built very trusting relationships with our principals and they're comfortable with telling us things that, you know, are working, aren't working at the school." In addition, Pomona's superintendent saw her role as keeping up good communication in all directions regarding multiple projects so that she could be the one who says, "this is how it all fits together."

At all four districts, administrators in the central office took on leadership roles with the projects, becoming a part of the communication process.

The deputy superintendent at Lennox said, "I have a connection with every part and every person on the program and so it's a very tight relationship. We think of Lennox – we think of everybody – as a family. We're small enough to be able to do that."

The evaluator at Desert Sands explained the importance of communication between the school or classroom and the central information technology unit: "Suppose principals and the district's curriculum department select a writing curriculum and then purchase it without consulting the technology department. The curriculum specialists may find themselves surprised that the software accompanying the curriculum overtaxes the capabilities of classroom computers. Problems like this are avoided through frequent communication among departments in the school district." Desert Sands had achieved this kind of

productive listening and communication through active use of e-mail, frequent meetings, and close coordination between instructional technology personnel at the district and computer users at the schools, the evaluator said.

At least one district also had direct experience with the importance of lateral – teacher-to-teacher – communication. Inglewood's goal was to build professional learning communities focused on math teaching within schools. For these communities to affect instruction, teachers had to begin taking initiative as instructional leaders. One teacher was in a novel position as the only eighth-grade math teacher at a K-8 school; other eighth-grade teachers in the district worked at middle schools and benefitted from having grade-level colleagues. In order to be part of a professional learning community, this teacher took it upon herself to call "a meeting amongst all eighth-grade algebra teachers in the district." The reform champion characterized this action as a "great strategy; you get to talk about the different things; you get to share each other's data from each other's schools. That's what we're trying to develop. This process changes the culture of your school and that's what we're getting all of the teachers to understand."

CONCLUSION

The superintendents in the four districts took on the daunting task of implementing significant, though seemingly very different reforms. But as we looked across the four urban districts, we identified a common framework that these superintendents used to achieve early success.

By attending to strategic positioning in advance of implementation, each superintendent assessed and refined the fit of the reform to the district context. Each superintendent also exercised "hands-on" leadership that was data-driven and highly focused on curriculum and instructional issues, without micromanaging implementation. Finally, prior to implementation, the districts invested in a reform champion who had sufficient expertise and access to resources to keep the project on track. Now better prepared, the superintendents and reform champions launched their reforms through the process of strategic implementation: A coherent set of actions, sensitively implemented, adapted, monitored and evaluated. Looking back on several years of work across the four school districts, the primary implementation lesson learned amounted to "plan boldly, but lead sensitively." Superintendents and reform champions pursued major, focused reform projects, while at the same time executing them with the "right level" of focus, involvement, speed, and flow of information and communication across all stakeholders.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This strategy brief was prepared by Andrew Thomas and Priscilla Wohlstetter, with assistance from Guilbert C. Hentschke, the Cooper Chair in Public School Administration, all of the University of Southern California's Center on Educational Governance (CEG). The brief also benefited from the dedication of several USC doctoral students in CEG: Kris De Pedro, Michelle Nayfack, Cecilia Sam and Dara Zeehandelaar, who provided valuable assistance with data collection and coding.

We also would like to thank the educational leaders in the four school districts participating in the Urban School Districts Reform Initiative. Without their cooperation and support, this brief would not offer the richness and authenticity afforded by their experiences.

The Urban School Districts Reform Initiative is supported by a generous grant from the Weingart Foundation. We thank them for their support and participation in the Initiative, but acknowledge that the findings presented here are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation or the educational leaders in the four school districts.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrew Thomas is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Southern California's Center on Educational Governance. Dr. Thomas received his Ph.D. in Urban Education from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Priscilla Wohlstetter is the Diane and MacDonald Becket Professor of Educational Policy at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, where she also serves as Director of USC's Center on Educational Governance. Dr. Wohlstetter is the Principal Investigator of the Urban School Districts Reform Initiative.

Center on
Educational Governance
University of Southern California
Rossier School of Education
Waite Phillips Hall, Suite 901
Los Angeles, CA 90089-4039

Phone: (213) 740-0697
Web: www.usc.edu/cegov/

USC Rossier
School of Education