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New CORE Districts Research Highlights On-the-Ground Learnings on Continuous Improvement and the Benefits of a Networked Approach

In a new brief, the CORE Districts and Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) highlight lessons learned from the first year of efforts within CORE's eight districts to employ the principles of improvement science together within a networked structure. The brief "Building System Knowledge for Continuous Improvement: Early Lessons from the CORE Districts" paints a picture of what continuous improvement activities can look like in school districts, shares first steps educators can use to refine their own practices and highlights the benefits of a networked approach.

"While continuous improvement is now at the heart of school accountability efforts in California, too many schools and districts lack the expertise and capacity to support changes to scale," says Michelle Nayfack, lead author of the brief. "PACE is pleased to gather, analyze and share one-the-ground learnings from the CORE districts to help more educators build continuous improvement organizations."

The CORE Districts are leveraging their shared data system and strengthening their ongoing collaboration to solve a common problem – middle school math outcomes and the performance gap for African American and Hispanic/Latino students. The eight districts are applying a specific continuous improvement framework known as Networked Improvement Communities to reach their goal.

"We are identifying our biggest challenges and opportunities together with teachers and students," explained Daniel Allen, Executive Director of School Renewal at Santa Ana Unified "The CORE network helps keep our work on track and builds mutual accountability across our systems."

PACE conducted surveys, analyzed field notes from 23 CORE convenings, and conducted interviews that captured the learnings of more than a hundred educators in the CORE network. Lessons featured in the report include:

1. Effective systems analysis starts with creating an improvement team that is set up for success.
2. The systems analysis process enables educators to revise, refine and expand their initial hypotheses about the reasons behind their problem of practice.
3. Accessing and interpreting different types of data is crucial to building a complete understanding of a problem of practice.
4. Teams that are getting started in continuous improvement benefit from expert facilitation and learn-by-doing activities.

"We are excited to be involved in this critical work and to share our early learnings with other districts across the state," says Chris Steinhauser, Superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District and chair of the CORE Board of Directors. "We're eager to help other educators who are working hard to support their students."

The brief offers educational leaders interested in closing the knowing-doing gap the following first steps:

- Determine who needs to be part of the improvement team to ensure a full picture of your system.
- Decide how to coordinate your team's work, including roles, responsibilities, and purpose.
- Identify routines and structures that support the collaboration of your cross-functional team, and provide different types of opportunities to share progress and troubleshoot challenges.
- Assess your capacity to collect, analyze and use both systems-level data and data that will help build understanding about the perspectives of parents, students, teachers and school leaders.
- Clarify areas where more resources or professional development is needed.
- Anticipate and plan for challenges by identifying existing system structures or processes that facilitate inquiry and which create barriers to success.

To view the full report please visit: http://www.edpolicyinca.org/publications/building-systems-knowledge-for-continuous-improvement

To view a two-page overview visit: http://coredistricts.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CIC.Facts_.at_.a.Glance1v3.pdf

About the CORE Districts

Founded in 2010, the CORE Districts harness knowledge to transform learning across eight school districts in California. The eight districts, situated in Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco and Santa Ana, together participate in the largest education network in the nation using improvement science to understand the biggest challenges and the most promising solutions to closing gaps in education.

About PACE

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center based at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, and the University of California – Davis. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.