

Perspectives from the field in Year 3: Impact and effective- ness of RTT-D collaboration Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education awarded the Road Map Region Race to the Top District (RTT-D) grant to the Auburn School District, Federal Way Public Schools, Highline Public Schools, Kent School District, Renton School District, Seattle Public Schools, Tukwila School District, and the Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD) to reduce the gaps in achievement and opportunity across the region. The groups of RTT-D are committed to strengthening early learning through 3rd grade systems, expanding awareness and exploration of education and careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and improving postsecondary readiness. RTT-D is driven by the principles outlined in Stanford Social Innovation Review's 2011 "Collective Impact" article, which emphasizes the importance of "abandoning individual agendas in favor of a collective approach to improving student achievement."¹ Therefore, all seven districts are working with numerous community-based organizations (CBOs) and with the PSESD as the fiscal and management agent to ensure the most effective and innovative approaches are used to close the achievement gap.

This report takes a deeper look at partnerships occurring under RTT-D, building on the last evaluation report, which highlighted general trends and challenges that affect school-CBO partnerships, and including a focus on district-to-district partnerships. School-to-CBO partnerships and district-to-district partnerships are an integral aspect of the Collective Impact approach to close gaps in achievement and opportunity across the region. Specifically, RTT-D invested in several Deep Dive partnerships, projects in very high-poverty settings that can benefit from strong community partnerships between schools and CBOs that support students during and outside of the school day throughout the entire year. In addition, this year's evaluation captures participants' perspectives on the impact of RTT-D on strategy goals and recommends which particular strategies should and could be sustained beyond the life of the grant.

Data from this report came from 34 interviews or focus groups and an online survey administered to 231 people who had been identified by the PSESD as key RTT-D program implementers and stakeholders. Survey and interview data are presented by role/organization (e.g., school or district, CBO, PSESD, and RTT-D Executive Committee), and findings are presented thematically after the appropriate evaluation question.

¹ Kania, John, and Mark Kramer. "Collective Impact." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2011, 36-41.

Major Findings

Partnerships Between CBOs and Schools

Evaluation Question #1: How are partnerships working?

- **New partnerships between schools and CBOs have formed under RTT-D.** Slightly fewer than half of survey respondents and nearly half of interview respondents indicated partnerships between schools and CBOs were new (see Figure 3, p. 23).
- **Partnerships between schools and CBOs in RTT-D are focused on closing specific opportunity and achievement gaps.** RTT-D Deep Dive partnerships between CBOs and schools are focused more on literacy, parenting resources/family support, and community engagement/outreach and less on college access and retention (see Figure 4, p. 25). This may be due to the fact that most RTT-D Deep Dive partnership work is between elementary schools and CBOs, as opposed to high schools.

Evaluation Question #2: How are districts and CBOs supporting partnerships?

- **School and CBO partners seem to understand the programs and resources their respective partners bring to the partnership.** School and CBO partners' perceptions of the resources and knowledge they each bring to the partnership are similar, suggesting that school and CBO partners may have a clear understanding of how their respective partners fill important needs (p. 26).
 - However, when asked what resources CBOs and schools thought they brought to the partnerships, significantly fewer CBOs than schools indicated that they brought “knowledge/expertise” as a resource to the partnership (see Figure 7, p. 28).
 - CBOs tend to bring deeper knowledge of the local community to school–CBO partnerships. A higher percentage of CBOs reported that they brought a stronger network in their local communities than schools did (see Figure 9, p. 30).

Evaluation Question #3: What do practices look like on the ground? To what extent have changes been made system-wide to support and sustain effective partnerships?

- **School and CBO partners suggested that their frequent communication is meaningful and appropriate for managing their partnership work.** School–CBO partners reported feeling satisfied with the number of times they communicate with each other and often seek feedback from each other about their partnership activity, finding such feedback useful to their work. Interview findings suggest that, when partners meet, they may troubleshoot implementation challenges with their school and CBO partners and seek feedback on how to deal with meeting deliverable deadlines (p. 32).
- **Partners identified clear roles to provide coordinated services in their partnership.** Each CBO provided to schools the specific programming that the school itself could not provide. Most partners did not depend on each other to provide services but provided mostly independent programming for students at the same school site (p. 37).
- **School and CBO partners reported only occasionally using or analyzing data, instead looking most often at informal implementation data.** School–CBO partnerships reported using anecdotal data, program implementation data (e.g., the number of students served, the number of events), and summative student outcome data (e.g., standardized test scores) in their partnership work, as opposed to formative student data (e.g., data that allow staff to monitor student learning in real time), or other outcome data. Partners would like to look at more academic outcome data (both summative and formative) than they did at the time of the survey (see Figure 17, p. 42). However, partners reported in interviews that they may have difficulty accessing data and/or may lack the appropriate measures that would capture impact of their programs on student outcomes.
- **Partners reported having discussions about how to break down racial and cultural barriers to increase families’ and students’ access to opportunities and services.** Most school and CBO partners suggested that they had ongoing conversations about race and equity during their Deep Dive partnership meetings and discussed how they attempted to provide services to students in the school community who are more likely underserved (p. 50).
 - The PSESD had adapted the City of Seattle’s Racial Equity Toolkit to develop their own Racial Equity Tool (RET) to use with educational partners, including those within RTT-D in 2013–14. Slightly more than one quarter of respondents reported that they had heard of the Racial Equity Tool, with districts reporting

using it the most out of CBOs, the PSESD, and those labeled “other” (see Figure 20, p. 50).

- While the PSESD began using the RET in their work with districts and other partners in 2013–14, there is currently no formal process to share the RET with CBOs (p. 49).

Evaluation Question #4: What are the best practices identified by successful school–CBO partnerships?

- **Practice 1 – Communicate frequently.** Ongoing meetings with structures and systems allowed partners to learn about each other and build relationships that fostered collaboration and better understanding about the work. Ongoing communication is a characteristic of strong, effective models of school–CBO partnership (p. 51).
- **Practice 2 – Develop shared vision and establish partner roles at the onset of the partnership.** Having a clear vision and partnership roles is also a measure of effective partnerships. Both schools and CBOs agreed that they shared with their CBO or school partner the same vision about closing the opportunity gaps. While schools agreed that they were on track to meet project outcomes with their CBO partners, CBOs seemed less sure that the partnerships would meet project outcomes (see Figure 21, p. 53).
- **Practice 3 – Secure strong leadership critical to managing partnerships and gaining buy-in.** It was effective to have a leader facilitate the day-to-day relationships and implementation of the partnership as a core responsibility, rather than adding responsibilities to existing roles outside of the partnership. Securing a dedicated coordinator who does not serve in a concurrent role, like the school principal, to facilitate the day-to-day relationships and implementation of partnership may be critical to ensuring that a partnership is effective (p. 55).

Partnerships Between Districts

Evaluation Question #1: How are district–district partnerships working?

- **Respondents reported that district–district partnerships are developing in some RTT-D project areas.** Interview and focus group respondents related that districts had not worked together in the past and that efforts to collaborate or make system-wide decisions are new. However, partnerships between districts are forming in some areas in specific project areas due to their participation in RTT-D (p. 58).

- **Formation of partnerships between districts may require a designated facilitator and shared agreement between partners regarding partnership goals and strategies.** The building of partnerships among district staff seemed to require someone designated or willing to focus these efforts, and school districts do not seem to take on responsibility for finding someone for this role currently. PSESD efforts to bring partners together in the project lead meetings and the convenings seemed to be a critical factor in helping them develop these relationships (p. 60).

Value of Participating in the RTT-D Consortium

Evaluation Question #5: What benefits do CBOs and schools/districts attribute to being part of the RTT-D consortium?

- **Stakeholders attributed an increase in understanding of services provided to students in the region to participation in RTT-D.** Survey respondents were asked a series of questions to better understand the influence of RTT-D on particular aspects of working across sectors and participants' understanding of key RTT-D issues (see Table 6, p. 62). CBOs, school districts, the PSESD, and those labeled "other" agreed that RTT-D had influenced their understanding of why opportunity gaps exist, their efforts to create equitable and inclusive relationships with families and community members, and their efforts to eliminate opportunity gaps and institutional racism.
- **School districts, the PSESD, and those labeled "other" agreed that they had become more aware of the types of services and programs provided by other school districts in the region.** However, school district respondents and those labeled "other" disagreed that districts had begun to collaborate with other districts to offer regionally based services (see Table 8, p. 64).
- **Stakeholders attributed expansion of regional student services to participation in RTT-D.** CBOs and schools have expanded their services through the Deep Dive partnership. Partners were also able to align their services more closely with school staff and create relationships with teachers, and some even developed new services or programs as a result of RTT-D partnerships (p. 64).
- **Stakeholders attributed system changes in region to RTT D.**
 - *Changes in institutional policies and procedures.* One change in policy included the creation of a common kindergarten registration date across all seven districts. Districts are also creating a data portal that allows the sharing of student-level

information between school districts to better support students who move between districts (p. 65).

- *Increase in equity perspective.* Findings from interviews also suggested that the equity perspective has increased across the region. Participants reported that conversations about equity have increased and some practitioners are starting to use the concepts of equity and access when making decisions (p. 66).
 - Based on a greater awareness of the inequitable power structures between CBOs and school districts, the PSESD has modified the application process for school–CBO partnerships, allowing CBOs to apply as funding leads and setting up a system to provide technical assistance during the proposal process.
 - In response to the feedback that more community representation was needed on the Executive Committee, the Executive Committee discussed changing their membership structure to include more community voice. Although the vote to change its membership structure did not pass, the Executive Committee did create a public comment section during their meetings to increase those perspectives in their decisionmaking.
- **Respondents felt that work in RTT-D as a whole is more effective than the work of any single organization.** All groups agreed that the work happening within the RTT-D partnerships and projects is more effective than the work of any one entity alone (see Table 9, p. 68).
- **The majority of stakeholders believed that many RTT-D strategies had been instrumental in closing gaps and that the region should continue to focus on building capacity to address students’ personalized learning needs.** In general, respondents assigned similar average ratings across all RTT-D strategies, with no particular strategy receiving substantially higher or lower ratings than another. Despite varying feedback about the perceived impact of personalized learning on RTT-D goals, respondents expressed that many personalized learning strategies would be important to sustain. The highest rated strategies are listed here. For a full breakdown, see Table 10–Table 13 (pp. 69–71).
 - Foundational Projects
 - Our region has expanded use of data to drive improvement.
 - Start Strong
 - Our region has improved kindergarten readiness and early literacy skills.
 - STEM Strong
 - Our region has increased student learning in STEM.

- Stay Strong
 - Students have increased participation in college and career programs in our region.
 - Our region’s schools have increased enrollment in college prep and college credit-bearing courses.
- **Respondents appreciate support offered by the PSESD.** In response to the needs of those implementing RTT-D strategies, the PSESD has offered a number of mechanisms to support partnerships in applicable areas. Survey respondents were asked to rate various aspects of support from the PSESD (see Table 14, p. 76). On average, respondents agreed with the majority of these items, indicating that on the whole, *those who were aware of or had used* certain support services felt positively about them.
 - Respondents assigned the highest average rating to the statement, “PSESD has made changes to their processes based on feedback received from the RTT-D consortium” and the lowest average rating to the statement, “Technical assistance provided by PSESD helped our organization be more effective in providing our services” (see Table 14, p. 76).

Sustainability of RTT-D Strategies

Evaluation Question #6: Which practices, structures, or programs have impacted intended outcomes and should be sustained beyond Race to the Top?

- **Stakeholders believed that the region is likely to accomplish the goals of the Foundational Projects, Start Strong, and Stay Strong, but slightly less likely to accomplish the goals of STEM Strong.** Survey respondents were asked to answer questions about Foundational Projects, Start Strong, STEM Strong, and Stay Strong strategies. The highest rated strategies are listed here. For a full breakdown, see Table 15–Table 26 (pp. 79–89).
 - *Foundational Projects*
 - Goal: The goal of Foundational Projects is to collaborate regionally to create intensive school–community partnerships.
 - Respondents believed the region would “probably” accomplish this goal.
 - Region should prioritize sustaining investment in teacher and leader professional development in math, science, and English Language Learner instruction and the scaling of community–school partnerships focused on geographic areas to bridge in-

and out-of-school time to support family engagement, English Language Learners, and personalized learning.

- *Start Strong*
 - Goals: The goals of Start Strong are to improve kindergarten readiness and early literacy skills and to build leadership and instructional capacity in pre-K–3rd grade.
 - Respondents believed the region would “probably” accomplish this goal.
 - Region should prioritize sustaining implementation of a comprehensive pre-K–3rd grade approach in schools and communities.
- *STEM Strong*
 - Goal: The goal of STEM Strong is to equip teachers with standards-based tools to personalize STEM instruction.
 - Respondents believed the region would “likely not” accomplish this goal.
 - Region should prioritize sustaining implementation of Next Generation Science Standards.
- *Stay Strong*
 - Goals: The goals of Stay Strong are to increase student eligibility for and participation in college and career through rigorous coursework and college and career planning.
 - Respondents believed the region would “probably” accomplish this goal.
 - Region should prioritize providing free College Board assessments (PSAT, SAT) during the school day.

Recommendations

Shift from technical to adaptive challenges

Interview and survey results indicated that RTT-D was very effective in implementing practices that required technical changes. Technical challenges, while they may be very complex and critically important, have known solutions that can be implemented through current practice or structure. Adaptive challenges, however, require learning among stakeholders in order to change the way they do business. The PSESD and consortium should continue to explicitly leverage the technical changes, which may be very complex and critically important but have known solutions that can be implemented through current practice or structure, to create adaptive change, which can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, and habits (p. 90).

Promote and support the active use of data

Data availability and use were consistent challenges faced by CBOs, schools, and the PSESD. In order to have adaptive discussions with practitioners and stakeholders, the right data need to be available at the right time. Interview respondents believed that the right data often were not available when they needed to make decisions, or that they did not have access to that data. Having that data would allow for continuous improvement conversations about the practice, an adaptive conversation (p. 91).

Balance power dynamics through equitable representation of stakeholders

In response to feedback from stakeholders about the lack of diverse representation in the Executive Committee and an inequitable funding process that gave districts and not CBOs control of the partnership funding, PSESD attempted to change both of these structures to balance the power dynamics, specifically creating a public comment section during the Executive Committee meetings to increase sharing of diverse community perspectives. A next step by the consortium may be to see how well known this change is and the extent that community members feel comfortable using the opportunity. While the structure has been created, it is still important to determine if the community can and does access the opportunity and to understand what supports they may still need, if any (p. 93).

Strengthen the school–CBO partnership model

In the 2015 Nature and Quality of Partnerships Evaluation Report², RTI recommended that RTT-D develop system-wide supports for authentic school–CBO partnerships. PSESD and Consortium members have begun to develop a model of Authentic School–Community Partnerships that systematically identifies best practices in order to strengthen partnership structures. In this report, we have identified best practices in the field that can deepen this model (p. 94).

- **Secure a strong leader to facilitate the partnership.** The coordination of an effective partnership between the school and CBOs takes extensive follow-through and continuous communication with all partners. Securing a dedicated coordinator to facilitate the day-to-day relationships and implementation of the partnership may be critical to ensuring that a partnership is effective. The partnership facilitator would then be responsible for **facilitating ongoing and frequent communication, developing shared vision, and establishing partner roles and responsibilities.**
- **Conduct a needs assessment** at the beginning of the partnership.

² See <https://roadmapracetothetop.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Exh-IVb-RTI-Partnerships-Report.pdf>.

- Select organizations with which to partner based upon the needs assessment.
- **Support development of collaborative services.** In many partnerships, each CBO provides their own programs and services without requiring other CBOs or school staff to be a part of those efforts. While not all CBOs or schools require intimate participation in each other's products or services, support is needed for CBOs and schools, or CBOs and CBOs, to develop mutual goals or activities that allow for greater alignment to close achievement and opportunity gaps.
- **Clarify the role of the district in authentic school–CBO partnerships.** Districts can play a vital role in establishing and supporting school–CBO partnerships. Even if districts may not be positioned to take on the day-to-day site coordination of a school–CBO partnership, districts can provide technical assistance, particularly in areas such as data use, to ensure that schools and their partners conduct appropriate needs assessments, ensure that new partners are included in partnerships, eliminate structural barriers, and support partnership development.

Deepen the PSESD's role as a boundary spanner

Part of the PSESD's role as the backbone support provider is that of a boundary spanner working to develop trust between groups that do not have a strong history of working together. Respondents were positive about the support provided by the PSESD. They specifically liked the role-alike convenings and the regional perspective that the PSESD brought to the work, and they noted that the learning community convenings have improved over time. To further develop their role, PSESD could

- **Expand its outreach and communication**, as many survey respondents, particularly CBO respondents, indicated that they did not know of the supports offered by the PSESD;
- **Continue to push for and support conversations about equity**; and
- **Continue to engage in authentic conversations with all stakeholders and support their conversations with one another**, as the consortium has intentionally raised the voice of the community and now can further encourage and support conversations between all stakeholder groups (p. 96).

Continue regional collaboration

Both the PSESD and the Executive Committee staff suggest that some district staff are sharing resources with each other and some are starting to feel comfortable calling their counterpart in another district for assistance (p. 98).

- Continuing to build these regional relationships requires someone designated or willing to focus on this work. PSESD efforts to bring partners together in the project lead meetings and the convenings seemed to be a critical factor in developing these relationships and should continue.
- While opportunities to come together may be crucial to forge relationships between staff, actual collaboration may only happen if partners agree on what they want to accomplish and the appropriate strategies to get there. A focus of convenings should be to highlight areas that require regional collaboration in order to best support equitable outcomes for students.