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Coherent Assistance in Education Improvement: How Foundations Can Help

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Introduction

Efforts to address education improvement can suffer from incoherence (Elmore, 2004; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001). Multiple projects are often going on in a district or school at the same time, and frequently with different foci, theories of improvement, methodologies, district champions, resources, and time horizons. As a result, improvement efforts often compete for time, attention, personnel, and other district resources. This is a complex problem, ripe for social innovation — and the sort of work that philanthropies seem well positioned to do.

Foundations appear well-suited to address this issue for several reasons. The problem is significantly challenging and ubiquitous, and impedes progress toward improvement in the education field. No government entity is working on making instructional improvement efforts more coherent, particularly when the efforts involve multiple organizations and agencies. Yet, philanthropic organizations can inadvertently contribute to the problem by funding programs that meet their goals but may not address the most pressing needs of school districts.

The Aligned Partners Project, a three-year study of an interorganizational collaboration to align the tools and services of three technical assistance organizations (TAOs) to meet one school district's needs, found significant challenges in developing coherent technical assistance (TA).¹ Our study examined the causes of those challenges and identified three grantmaking practices that could

Key Points

- Philanthropic organizations are experimenting with ways to support capacity building in order to scale innovations and leverage funding for greater social impact. Increasingly, philanthropies are also attending to their own organizational needs for learning in order to inform strategy, shape future work, and measure effectiveness.
- This article shares the lessons of the Aligned Partners Project, a three-year study of a foundation-funded interorganizational collaboration to align the work of three technical assistance organizations to meet the needs of one school district. It identifies challenges to providing coherent assistance as well as grantmaking practices that could address them.
- A foundation seeking to fund an education-improvement project is encouraged to work with all key stakeholders in the earliest stages to establish a learning agenda, hire a partner outside the project to facilitate that agenda's development, and involve district stakeholders in project goals and design. This article also argues for awarding research grants as a capacity-building strategy to support grantees and grantmaking organizations, and to yield greater impact in the field.

improve efforts to use TA to develop greater instructional coherence in school districts:

1. In the earliest stages of a project, the foundation should work with all key

¹For the purposes of this article, we identify two dimensions of coherent TA: the ability of TAOs to co-produce a solution to the problem of separate and unintegrated TA offerings, and their ability to contextualize that assistance to meet a district's needs.

stakeholders to establish a learning agenda that includes each participant's goals for the project, and a governance structure that outlines clear roles, decision-making processes, and communication systems.

2. The foundation can hire a nonproject partner to facilitate this critical work and aid interorganizational communication. The funder of this study hired a research organization (the authors of this paper) to document and analyze this project as it occurred.
3. Before funding a project, the foundation should engage key stakeholders from the school district (e.g., school site and central office personnel) in developing the project goals and design; their contribution will be critical to developing coherence.

Learning From the Aligned Partners Project

The Aligned Partners Project investigated the possibilities for interorganizational partnership among three TAOs — organizations that provide specialized knowledge, skills, and expertise — as a way to contribute to greater coherence of improvement efforts within one specific school district (Jaquith & Chavez, 2020). Each TAO brought distinctive strengths and capacities to the project:

- the “teaching” TAO specialized in project-based teaching,
- the “assessment” TAO had skills in the development and implementation of performance assessments, and
- the “leadership” TAO had expertise in supporting the work of school district leaders to develop career-integrated, interdisciplinary courses of study.

The foundation funding the project had existing grants with each TAO and relationships with their executive leaders, and saw the potential

for these three TAOs, working together, to help the district develop the capacity necessary to transform teaching and learning for the benefit of students. Foundation leaders encouraged the TAOs to explore a three-way collaboration and invited them to submit a concept paper, which was circulated among foundation leaders and led to follow-up discussions and a formal proposal. Before making a final funding decision, the foundation initiated a site visit to the school district to discuss the project with district leaders and the TAOs.

Data collection for this qualitative study, which occurred in three phases, commenced shortly after the foundation awarded the first grant to the Aligned Partners Project and spanned the duration of the grant period plus an additional year. (See Table 1.) The chief purpose for data collection was to understand how the partnership progressed and to what extent the project was able to develop coherence in the district's efforts to support secondary teachers' use of project-based teaching and performance assessment methods. Data collection was both planful and emergent (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 2006). We observed, interviewed, and collected relevant documents from the three groups involved in the project: the TAOs, the foundation, and the school district, including district and site administrators, staff, teachers, and students. (See Table 2.)

Data analysis was ongoing and led to the collection of additional data. To examine the data, we used the Four I's of decision-making (Weiss, 1995), an analytic lens that helped to illuminate the complex interplay among the partners' interests, ideologies, and information-sharing behaviors, and the broader institutional environment. This analysis revealed how hidden aspects of partnership work — personal relationships, trust, power, beliefs, and organizational and personal interests — intersect and influence actions.² For instance, organizational norms and beliefs about how TA operates or should operate differed among the individuals involved in the project and influenced the sort of information

² Social network analysis would be a useful analytic tool to use in future studies of interorganizational partnerships.

TABLE 1 Grant Activity and Project Timeline

Project Phases	Grant Activities
<p>Project Design Summer 2015 – February 2016</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idea for multigrantee project emerges and concept paper is invited • Discussions among technical assistance organizations (TAOs) and school district and among foundation, TAOs, and district occurs • Formal proposal is submitted to foundation • Foundation and TAOs visit district to discuss proposed project • Foundation asks Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (Scope) to consult with each TAO about its potential role in Aligned Partners Project
<p>Project Planning August 2016 – May 2017</p>	<p>One-year grants (with opportunity to renew) awarded to TAOs (Spring 2016) and to Scope (Summer 2016)</p> <p>TAOs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work to develop aligned products and services • Hold three all-day planning meetings <p>Scope</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin documentation of the project work • Share field notes from each planning meeting with TAOs • Prepare internal technical assistance (TA) memo, share with each TAO, and discuss contents
<p>Project Implementation Summer 2017 – Winter 2018</p>	<p>Both grants renewed for the following year</p> <p>TAOs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4-day TA workshop in district, Summer 2017 • 1-day follow-up session in district, October 2017 • 1-day follow-up session in district, February 2018 <p>Scope:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepares internal funder memo and shares with the foundation, August 2017 • Prepares internal administrative memo and shares with district, June 2018 • With district permission, shares internal administrative memo with TAOs and foundation, October 2018

Reflective Practice

they thought to share or seek out. The TAOs initially assumed that they had similar views of these less-visible aspects of partnership work. This assumption had consequences that affected the ability of the project to realize the partnership’s full potential.³

Our analysis of the project revealed many significant accomplishments. One accomplishment was that the TAOs, accustomed to working independently and in different ways, developed a service offering that integrated project-based teaching and performance assessment. The assessment TAO said, “This is the first time [the teaching and assessment TAOs have] done

something ... that’s truly aligned. ...We’re planning together. We’re implementing together. We’re delivering together.” Both of those TAOs have since used these integrated tools and services with other districts. In addition, after the project began the TAOs reframed their project goals in terms of the district’s needs, rather than in terms of their own organizational interests (Jaquith & Chavez, 2020).

Our study also identified three significant challenges the project faced in achieving its dual goals of aligning services among the TAOs themselves and with the particular strengths, interests, and needs of the district’s educators and students:

³ See Jaquith & Chavez (2020) for more discussion of how the TAOs reframed their goals.

TABLE 2 Data Collected and Outcomes By Phase

Project Planning (Year 1)	
Data Collected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detailed field notes and documents from 60 hours of in-person Aligned Partners meetings and monthly, hour-long phone calls (August 2016–April 2018) Analytic memos of 3 in-person Aligned Partners meetings Interviews: Twice with representatives from each TAO; once with 7 district administrators
Preliminary Analyses	2 memos – 1 to TAOs and 1 to foundation – that highlighted patterns, synthesized themes, provided analysis of data collected to date, and raised questions for TAOs and the foundation to consider as project progressed
Project Implementation (Year 2)	
Data Collected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detailed field notes and documents from 6 days of TAO-led professional development (PD) sessions Interviews with teachers, administrators, and instructional support staff at schools who attended the PD sessions Classroom observations in 6 classrooms Focus groups with students in participating teachers’ classrooms
Preliminary Analyses	Administrator memo to the district with observations and questions about how teachers, administrators, and coaches participated in the Aligned Partners PD program and how they attempted to use the ideas, practices, and materials in their own work-place context
Follow-up (Year 3)	
Data Collected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews with executive leaders from each TAO and 3 foundation personnel Follow-up interviews with teachers and administrators at 1 school Interviews with 4 central office administrators with responsibility for instruction, teacher PD, and graduation defenses Observations of 12 graduation defenses Interviews with representatives from the assessment TAO and leadership TAO who supported the district graduation defenses

Reflective Practice

1. There was insufficient knowledge about and involvement with the district prior to the project’s start.
2. Each of the partners — the TAOs, the foundation, and the district — had different goals for the project, and none were aware of those differences before the project began.
3. The school district lacked the infrastructure to support its ongoing learning and experimentation with the project-based teaching and performance assessment methods — and the organizational partners had not

considered assistance to develop that infrastructure as part of the project.

Different conceptions of the TAO role contributed to these challenges (Jaquith & Chavez, 2020). Examining them might help a foundation identify ways to aid the development of more coherent TA.

The Work of Foundations

Foundations are a unique sort of organization. They are independent actors (Slater, Constantine, & Braverman, 2004), typically playing the roles of conveners, grantmakers, problem solvers, and social innovators. They also tackle some of

From the outset, the foundation wanted to learn from the Aligned Partners Project: In the words of its current president, it wanted “to learn alongside its grantees.”

our most complex and vexing social problems. Increasingly, foundations are experimenting with ways to support the development of needed capacity in the education field in order to bring innovations to scale and to leverage philanthropic dollars for greater social impact (Social Impact Exchange, n.d.).

In 2016, the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) reported that most foundation CEOs believed a path to greater impact was to take advantage of their unique role to experiment and innovate, and to listen to and learn from those they seek to help (Buteau, Orensten, & Loh, 2016). These leaders identified three types of barriers to progress faced by foundations: internal challenges, the external context of the foundation’s work, and a lack of collaboration. Each of these barriers is pertinent to our study.

For instance, some CEOs reported that finding highly qualified employees was a challenge. In our study, several foundation leaders also described personnel challenges, saying that the foundation took a hands-off approach to the Aligned Partners Project largely because it did not have program officers at that time with enough knowledge about the complexities of school districts to be particularly useful.

In terms of barriers involving the external context of the foundation’s work, CEOs told the CEP of having too few resources for the enormity and complexity of the problems on which they focused, particularly those related to underlying systems that needed to change (Buteau et al., 2016). The Aligned Partners Project grant

represented a small portion of the foundation’s limited portfolio. With this barrier in mind, the project can be viewed as a philanthropic experiment, helping grantees to collaborate on a systems problem and creating learning opportunities for future attempts at supporting interorganizational collaboration.

In this way, the project addresses the third barrier described by foundation CEOs: widespread lack of collaboration. In general, grantees are reluctant to collaborate with each other and foundations are often unwilling to collaborate on projects. Notably, a third of those surveyed by the CEP said more and better collaboration is a key strategy for helping foundations address society’s future needs (Buteau et al., 2016). Understanding the barriers foundations face is instructive not only in the case of the pioneering work of the particular foundation that this article examines, but in underscoring the need for foundations to forge practices that support collaboration, innovation, and learning in order to do their best work at solving social problems.

Grantmaking to Foster Coherence: A Step-by-Step Approach

Drawing upon the successes and challenges of the Aligned Partners Project, how can foundations approach grantmaking — particularly prior to funding, during the project design phase — to make it more likely that projects develop coherence and grow capacity in the field?

Plan for Intentional Learning

From the outset, the foundation wanted to learn from the Aligned Partners Project: In the words of its current president, it wanted “to learn alongside its grantees.” The foundation’s president serving at the start of the grant recalled that regardless of the success or failure of the project, the foundation wanted “to really understand what happened. What worked? What didn’t work? What did we learn? How did things emerge and change?” The foundation also thought that providing formative information to the TAOs and to the district as the project unfolded might assist them in realizing the project goals. So it awarded a grant to Stanford

University's Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE), a research organization that specializes in documenting ongoing efforts to provide in-the-moment feedback to the people doing the work as it occurs.⁴

As part of the planning for intentional learning, SCOPE and the foundation determined that SCOPE would document the collaboration among the three TAOs, document the implementation of the TA work in the school district, and provide formative memos about the unfolding work to the TAOs, the district, and the foundation. SCOPE discussed its project documentation role with the TAOs and the foundation prior to project funding and invited input from both about how it could best support each partner's learning in and from the work they were doing. All the partners expressed interest in the opportunity to learn from the work as it progressed and thought that SCOPE's role had the potential to reveal blind spots that could help them improve their individual and collective work.

The researchers made the project's work visible to all the partners at various points in the process by creating opportunities for the partners to reflect on their work in conversations and interviews, and by sharing field notes and memos that highlighted emerging themes, questions, and observations pertinent to the project's stated goals. At the end of the first year, SCOPE wrote two memos — one for the TAOs and district, the other for the foundation — that noted patterns, synthesized themes (e.g., the varied organizational interests of the TAOs and the district), provided an analysis of the data collected to date, and raised questions to consider as the project progressed. SCOPE also made several visits to the district to talk with school and district administrators about the project and what they were hoping to gain from their participation. At the end of year two, the implementation year, SCOPE wrote a memo for the district with observations and questions about how teachers, administrators, and coaches participated in the project's professional development (PD) program

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and how they used its ideas, practices, and materials in their own workplace context.

Although SCOPE's roles were clear from the outset, in hindsight it is also clear that giving some advance thought to how project partners might plan to discuss and make sense together of the researchers' observations and questions would have been useful. As one of the partners expressed in a conversation with the researchers, "The synthesis was really powerful and important, and I'd like to think about how we can actually use that to guide our reflections and support our work while we're in it."

As the project progressed, we learned that providing information and insights is not the same as helping people to make use of them. Therefore, if a foundation is going to make a significant investment in partners' learning, the design phase should include asking the project partners not only whether they would like feedback, but also how they plan to use that feedback as they proceed.

Involve the School District at the Beginning

Foundations can make it more likely that an education improvement partnership will succeed by involving school districts in the earliest stages. The Aligned Partners Project did not involve the district at the outset of the design phase, which created some barriers to the success of the project.

During the design phase, the foundation requested a meeting with the district representatives and the members of the three TAOs, but

⁴For a full description of Scope's work, see <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/whatwedo>.

Organizations decide to participate in projects and partnerships based upon their strengths, interests, and needs.

at that meeting the district was not asked about its goals for the project. A leader from one of the TAOs recalled that the meeting was “pretty unsatisfying and confusing.” From the district’s perspective, the meeting’s chief purposes were to persuade the foundation to fund the TAOs’ work and to learn whether the district would be the test site for that work.

“I didn’t know who was pitching to what,” one district administrator said. “It was obvious ... we had a lot of needs and we could use assistance, but [the conversation] was more about what [the foundation was] willing to fund.” By the time the TAOs developed their aligned tools and services, the district had forgotten that the project had received a grant and that work had begun. “That first year,” the administrator said, “it was more about the conversation that happened between [the TAOs]. ... It was just conversations that didn’t involve us.”

An observation by a representative from one of the TAOs may help explain this lack of early engagement: Districts tend to appreciate “free support ... that [they] otherwise might have to pay for.” While they may sometimes sign on to projects that are only loosely connected to their needs, it is not a practice that leads to coherent improvement efforts. The district’s interests could have been incorporated into the project design and budget if it had been involved and consulted from the outset.

Thinking back to the project’s design phase, a foundation director recalled that “this trio of providers had articulated clearly the goals of the district.” In retrospect, however, the director realized that the foundation did not solicit the district’s thoughts and expectations directly from its representatives:

Here’s what we should have done: Go to the district and go to the sites that are working with these folks. Talk to the principals and talk to the assistant superintendent. Really understand, from their point of view, what the highest value would be for investment.

Furthermore, districts should be asked to consider which of their stakeholders should be involved in the design phase. The people best positioned to speak for the district’s strengths, needs, and interests are often those with the power to allocate resources (time, money, expertise, and materials), the authority to direct educators’ attention, and knowledge of how goal-setting and decision-making occurs both at the central office and inside the schools. The districts should be relied upon to identify where these capacities reside (e.g., superintendent, director of curriculum and instruction, principal supervisors, principals, and teachers).

Identify the Interests of All Organizations Upfront

Organizations decide to participate in projects and partnerships based upon their strengths, interests, and needs. Xavier Briggs notes that “partnerships (or strategic alliances) allow us to tackle hard problems together and ‘co-produce’ solutions” (2003, p. 1), and describes partnering as a strategy for delivering value. When considering collaboration on a project, therefore, potential partners need to understand one another’s interests in order to make an informed decision about whether participating might be a way to deliver value — to one’s own organization and, perhaps, to society. This didn’t happen in the Aligned Partners Project. Instead, each of the TAOs remarked that they had made assumptions about each other and how they would work. “We’re philosophically aligned,” the leadership TAO recalled thinking. “We can do this. We’re friends.” A member of the teaching TAO said,

Did we all just think, “Hey, we’re going to all work in this space together. We’re going to do what we do, and we’re going to figure out how that works or doesn’t work,” instead of being intentionally design driven to say, “OK, we do certain things individually, but we’re going to collectively need to

be different in this effort, and how do we need to be different”?

The more organizations involved in a partnership, the wider the set of organizational interests a project presumably needs to satisfy. Therefore, if foundations are going to support interorganizational collaborations, it is a good idea to develop a project design process that helps all potential partners, including the foundation, have conversations about the organizational interests that are motivating their participation. Looking back on the Aligned Partners Project, the foundation director said, “I didn’t really interrogate the motivations.” In this case, that would have required conversations focused on the relational aspects of the planned work — how much trust a grantee has built and how a grantee plans to spend its time in the district — rather than on gathering technical information about the number of schools participating or the number of PD meetings planned.

Each organization involved in the Aligned Partners Project had its own reasons for participating. Without advance discussion about each of their underlying interests and motivations, it is not surprising that ultimate goals for the project differed. The teaching TAO said its initial goal was “to revise our three-day, project-based teaching professional development offering” to meet the needs of teachers in career-focused courses of study, and to consider ways to use the new offering with other districts. The assessment TAO said it wanted to understand how valuable and marketable the integration of the TAOs’ respective services might be to see “if we succeed in finding a way in which our services ... need each other,” and saw an opportunity to respond to the acceleration and growth of school districts’ interest in project-based teaching, performance assessment, and career-themed courses of study. The leadership TAO’s interests were “around leadership development” and creating “the leadership capacity conditions to support changes in teacher practice.” It also wanted to explore the possibility that their tri-organization collaboration would be more beneficial for a district than each TAO’s individual, discrete assistance offerings: Because of their expertise in performance

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assessment and project-based teaching, would involving the other two organizations in its systems-change efforts help the leadership TAO do its work better?

Meanwhile, the foundation’s primary interest was “this question of systems,” its president said: “How is the system of [TAOs] working together, or not, to support the district’s goals?” The district’s strengths, interests, and needs were central to the foundation’s goals, yet they were either absent from or ancillary to the project goals identified by the teaching and assessment TAOs. Indeed, throughout the project the assessment TAO often framed it as an “opportunity for R&D ... to develop materials for the broader field.” A member of this TAO viewed the project’s purpose as supporting the development of aligned tools for “the unknown and unnamed districts that come after.” This member said, “That’s the hugely philosophical difference that was always at the heart of this The [leadership TAO] would never accept the fact that this project was not about this particular district; it was about districts in general.” This statement also makes clear that the assessment TAO did not understand that the foundation’s interest in the project was to learn how or if TAOs could directly support district goals.

Ultimately, each organization’s interest in the project was influenced by its own mission, perception of its internal capacity, and ways it conducted its work. Once the project proposal and budget were complete and the grant awarded, it was not easy to revisit and refine the project goals for any of the organizations, although significant time and well-meant effort was spent attempting to do so.

Establishing two-way communication among all partners is critical for sharing information and understanding organizational interests, both of which can help establish interorganizational trust and foster greater coherence.

Establish Communication Mechanisms Among All Partners

Establishing two-way communication among all partners is critical for sharing information and understanding organizational interests, both of which can help establish interorganizational trust and foster greater coherence. Developing a governance structure at the project's outset for communication and decision-making is important. While choosing one organization to be the chief spokesperson for the Aligned Partners Project seemed like a good way to streamline communication, we found that doing so created problems for the relationships between the TAOs and the foundation and between the TAOs and the district.

The foundation's goals for the project were not clearly communicated to the other partners. Early on, a district administrator expressed a desire for "more clarity" on why the project was being funded; the assessment TAO reported never having "direct conversations with the foundation about ... what they were hoping to accomplish." The foundation was chiefly concerned with meeting the district's goals, while two of the TAOs had different priorities. At the conclusion of the project, the assessment TAO said, "One of the things that has been trickiest about aligning on this project has just been people's understanding of the boundaries and ... rationale behind the project." This TAO believed that the three organizations could have better accomplished their goals — developing tools that

aligned — if they had collaborated on a theory of alignment before identifying the district partner, because that could have enabled the selection of a district better suited to test their theory. This perspective underscores the fundamental disconnect between the TAOs' understanding of the project's purpose and the foundation's goals. Such misunderstandings may have persisted because there was insufficient communication among the TAOs, the foundation, and the district. Working effectively in partnership takes time and energy; funders, therefore, need to be prepared to invest in that time and energy.

Another breakdown in communication occurred when the assessment TAO, in its effort to better understand the district's performance assessment needs and to determine what tools could be useful, initiated its own one-on-one visits with district representatives. Although the assessment TAO informed the full team about these visits — and, indeed, the visits provided important information — a significant and overlooked consequence of the visits was that the teaching TAO became the only partner not talking directly with the district. After the project concluded, a leader of the teaching TAO said,

The frustrating part ... was around the leadership work and the fact that we didn't have access to school or district leaders as much as we would normally in a partnership. This really compromised our ability to customize the curriculum for teachers the way we needed to and to ensure that teachers were going to get the support that they deserved.

Ultimately, communication needed to flow among the TAOs themselves and among the TAOs, the foundation, and the district. Without more thorough conversations about what would be required for the district to use and learn from its use of the Aligned Partners tools, the roles of each organization were underconceptualized, underdeveloped, and, perhaps, underresourced.

Identify Organizational Roles that Best Serve Project Goals

If goals are more thoroughly discussed with all participating organizations before a project

begins, then the roles each organization can assume in the project become clearer. In the Aligned Partners Project design phase, the leadership and teaching TAOs discussed with each other which of their organizations would best be positioned as the grantee and the project's fiscal agent. Although both executive leaders reported thinking the leadership TAO might be best positioned to play this role, they opted for the teaching TAO because, they decided, that organization would be more likely to be awarded the grant — not the best basis for a role assignment. That this was the motivation — even in this collaboration, where all organizations had relationships with the foundation — underscores the need for a reimagined design phase that creates opportunities for participants to discuss such questions openly and to establish mechanisms for routine sharing of information among all partners.

In the design phase, foundations and potential project partners should explore together who from each organization will be involved in the project and how, if at all, executive-level leadership from each organization will be involved. If one of the goals is to change the nature of an organization or its work products (i.e., its fundamental interest), then high-level leadership needs to be knowledgeable and supportive as decisions are made. At minimum, executive-level leaders need to be kept informed about the evolving interorganizational dynamics that will occur in a multiorganization collaboration. Such discussions provide the following:

1. an opportunity for the funder and the organizations' leaders to determine how best to connect grant resources to the project goals;
2. the space to define reasonable expectations for each partner's commitment and effort, as well as the capacity to make institutional decisions for the duration of the project;
3. a greater likelihood that the funder and project partners have a shared

Before a project is funded, it will be useful to determine how the TAOs will work with school and district leaders to help identify and develop conditions that will enable the best use of project resources.

understanding of what successes will look like, how to attain them, and how to assess progress; and

4. a channel through which to address the common, ongoing disagreement within the field of philanthropy about the definition of impact and what it means to impact a system.

Help Schools Develop an Infrastructure for Ongoing Learning

Before a project is funded, it will be useful to determine how the TAOs will work with school and district leaders to help identify and develop conditions that will enable the best use of project resources. While district leaders are ultimately responsible for creating these conditions, they might benefit from some outside assistance. Questions to consider include: Who from the district should the partners talk to? Who knows the district's strengths, needs, interests, and concerns? Who is best positioned to provide logistical and practical support to the TAOs for working with the district and coordinating services? And, finally, who will provide political leverage for sustaining the work in the district after the project concludes?

The design phase is also the time to determine the in-kind contributions the district can make to the project. This requires the district to clearly understand the project's aims and examine its own goals for TA.⁵ Asking the district for specific

⁵ See Jaquith & Snyder (2019) for a tool that can help districts fit TA to their goals.

examples of its commitment to the project will be useful to the project and to the district itself. Will it fund a portion of teachers' or administrators' time to attend PD that is offered as part of a capacity-building effort like the Aligned Partners Project? How will the district identify and select project participants? Will it convene and support school leaders and coaches to provide ongoing support to the project's PD participants? Will (and should) the district involve people with a range of school and central office roles in identifying its strengths, interests, and needs with regard to the professional resources the project will provide? And, finally, what will the district do to support and sustain the use of these resources? Questions of this nature, posed to the organizational partners, can also help signal the foundation's goals for the project.

Conclusion

A funding strategy that seeks to develop capacity in the field by helping to forge mutually beneficial interorganizational collaborations seems to be a promising way to grow and sustain the benefits of an education improvement project. In such collaborations, foundations can play an important brokering role in the development of relationships among TAOs, between the TAOs and their school district partner(s), and among TAOs, districts, and the foundation. The strength, quality, and nature of these relationships will be critical to the success of such complicated and dynamic projects, and investing in opportunities to discuss project goals pragmatically and honestly with all participants early on is a worthwhile investment.

As changes are inevitably introduced, the needs of participants will evolve. Therefore, continuous capacity for open and direct communication among the project partners is essential. Funders can take a number of steps to support the development and maintenance of these relationships over the project's different phases:

- Determine each organization's role, how the partnership will be managed and governed, the necessary internal capacity of each organization to assume its role, and the decision-making authority of organizational actors.
- Specify what successful implementation looks like from each organization's perspective.
- Clarify communication mechanisms among project partners, between partners and the district, and between the project and the funder.

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- Articulate the goals and each partner's fundamental interest in the project, including the district's.

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