
Overview of the
Partners in School Innovation
Approach and Services



I. INTRODUCTION

The challenge

After decades of public policy aimed at improving the overall achievement of students, the gap that separates students from different backgrounds remains wide. This year thousands of schools in California were deemed low-performing. The majority of those schools are serving students of color.

Given the rigorous accountability systems connected to the federal No Child Left Behind Act, California's low-performing schools are searching for ways to dramatically improve student learning. It is becoming increasingly clear that schools need to build the capacity of their teaching force and their leaders to meet the rigorous standards of the accountability movement. Accountability pressure, without support to develop the mindsets, systems and structures that characterize outstanding public schools, is not enough to close the achievement gap. Because schools are under enormous time pressure to demonstrate results (often within one year), schools and districts often grasp for short-term solutions.

An integrated, comprehensive approach

Partners in School Innovation (PartnersSI) takes a long-term, integrated, comprehensive approach. We work to turn chronically low-performing schools around by leading and supporting them through a rigorous, multi-year change process that leads to short-term gains en route to long-term systemic change. We work to cultivate effective teaching and bold leadership at all levels in the school system. Through our intensive support, we enable schools and districts to create a culture of improvement characterized by high expectations, clear goals and an unwavering focus on accelerating student learning.

When schools are committed to continuous improvement, students are constantly learning and growing, both academically and socially. Teachers are not only teaching in inspiring and creative ways, they are fulfilled as professionals. They take risks and learn from their students and their colleagues about ways to improve instruction. Principals and other school leaders act boldly and always with the best interest of their students in mind. And district leaders are connected to the improvement efforts at their schools, channeling resources and supporting leaders to sustain the improvement process.

Fundamental school transformation is a difficult and lengthy process. Low-performing schools often lack the capacity to change without outside support. We are an organization with both the technical expertise to help them implement new systems and structures, and the focus on equitable teaching and leadership to help them develop and sustain a culture of improvement.

PartnersSI is a change agent. We believe that every public school can be a place of learning and inspiration. We believe that every child can succeed. And we are helping schools and districts to make this happen.

What to expect in this document

What follows is an overview of the PartnersSI approach and services—a description of the work we do in schools and districts to close the achievement gap and why it works. You'll learn about the work happening at multiple levels of the system, from the classroom to grade-level meetings to district offices to networks of teachers coming together. You will learn about the tensions that exist in our work and the challenges we hope to overcome as we grow. We hope you leave reading this document not only with an overview of the PartnersSI approach and our services, but also with a deep sense of our commitment to making the education system work effectively for all students, especially those for whom the system has not previously worked, namely our African American, Latino, and English Learner students.

II. OUR MISSION

The PartnersSI Mission

Our mission reads: “To enable schools in high-poverty Bay Area communities—serving students of color and English Language Learners—to achieve educational equity through school-based reform.”

Central to our organizational mission is our desire to strengthen our partner schools and districts so that they can close the achievement gap. Through our intensive, on-site support, we coach and support our partner schools and districts to put in place sustainable systems and practices that are explicitly focused on achieving and sustaining educational equity for students of color. We define equitable learning results as follows:

- All students are performing at high levels of achievement. We define high academic achievement levels as meeting or exceeding proficiency on the California Standards Test (CST).
- The predictability of student learning based on race, class, gender, language status or other group identity is eliminated.

While the CST is important because it is the general measure of standards mastery across the state and a common, easy-to-understand assessment—it is also just one indicator of the extent to which we have achieved our mission. We are currently searching for other measures of school improvement around school culture and students’ sense of efficacy to deepen our understanding of our impact on the schools we serve.

Why our mission matters

Our mission focuses explicitly on creating equitable learning opportunities and accelerated results for low-performing students of color. Without a strategic focus on *accelerating the performance of low-achieving students of color*, even well-intentioned school improvement efforts will have little impact on closing the achievement gap. Without this explicit focus, teachers may aim to reach the “middle to high” spectrum of students in the class rather than focus on accelerating the learning of those who are struggling most to access instruction and learn at high levels. In addition, teachers may attempt to “improve” their instruction in ways that are grounded in dominant, white middle class culture—thus diminishing the chances that students of color will access the content and meet high standards. Finally, teachers may, consciously or unconsciously, underestimate and undermine the capabilities of low-performing students of color and assume that they cannot achieve at high levels. Individual and institutional racism—in the form of lowered expectations from teachers and differentiated access to rigorous instruction, among other factors—play a large role in perpetuating the achievement gap.

Given the failure of many well-intentioned school reform efforts to make a tangible difference in closing the achievement gap, PartnersSI believes the goal of focusing explicitly on students of color and achieving educational equity needs to be *the driving focus* for all decision-making, resource allocation and action in school and district improvement. Throughout this document, we will describe a “results-orientation.” Teachers and leaders who have a results-orientation have an unwavering *focus on doing whatever it takes to accelerate the learning of currently low-performing students of color*. PartnersSI believes that when leaders, teachers and the community possess this focus for all of their actions, the achievement gap will close.

III. OUR APPROACH IN A NUTSHELL

Given our commitment to accelerating the achievement of students of color and creating rich, engaging learning environments for all students, our approach focuses on three main areas that we believe are the most significant levers to closing the achievement gap. What follows is a brief description of each. A more detailed description can be found later in this document.

1. We implement a strategic, integrated approach to teaching and learning

We implement a strategic, integrated approach to teaching and learning called the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry (ROCI) that is comprised of knowing the standards, diagnosing focal student needs, setting and working toward long- and short-term learning goals, backward planning from standards and assessments, investing students in their goals, teaching effectively and, throughout, continuously analyzing data to ensure learning goals are being met. PartnersSI staff works with teachers, coaches and school leaders to implement this approach and the systems that enable it to function well in our intensive implementation sites.

2. We advocate for and model culturally responsive mindsets

As we work with teachers and leaders each day, we strive to develop culturally responsive mindsets in ourselves and in others. This work is not separate from the implementation of our teaching and learning approach or our leadership coaching. We aim to advocate for and model culturally responsive mindsets in everything we do. You will learn more about culturally responsive mindsets later in this document.

3. We develop results-oriented leaders

We develop results-oriented leaders who act with an unwavering determination and focus to accelerate the learning of the lowest-performing students to achieve equity. Without leadership focused on leading people toward results, we will not close the achievement gap. Later in this document, you will find a description of effective, results-oriented leadership.

IV. OUR SERVICES

PartnersSI services to schools and districts

We teach and implement our approach in three interconnected ways:

- 1. Intensive Implementation Sites-**PartnersSI provides intensive implementation services to a subset of low-performing schools in each of our partner districts. PartnersSI staff is on-site four days a week to coach teachers, teacher leaders and principals to implement ROCI and establish the systems for sustainable and dramatic change. These schools serve as sites where our staff—in partnership with principals, coaches and teachers—translates our theory of change into practice to improve our schools.
- 2. Leadership Development Networks-**The second way that PartnersSI works with educators is through our *Leadership Development Networks*. PartnersSI is able to work across a broader group of schools within our districts and beyond to enable leaders to develop the skills, tools and knowledge to lead their own schools through ROCI. Through the Networks, PartnersSI also facilitates cross-school problem solving around the practical implementation challenges faced by the leaders.
- 3. District Leadership Coaching-**Finally, PartnersSI works in partnership with district leaders, coaching them to become bold, results-oriented leaders and to create the conditions necessary for their schools to sustain a continuous improvement effort that results in a dramatic closing of the achievement gap. PartnersSI is able to share with districts expertise developed from over fourteen years of daily experience with implementation of low-performing school improvement.

The goal is sustainability

PartnersSI enters schools and districts as a genuine partner. While we have a sound, proven approach to offer, we also know that each context is different. We work with each school and district to find the most productive and accelerated ways of getting break-through achievement results together. Ultimately, our goal is to “work ourselves out of a job”—that is, to close the achievement gap and develop the systems to sustain improvement—so that our support is no longer necessary. To meet this goal, we must work with school leadership and teachers in ways that support building ownership of and expertise in continuous improvement.

V. HOW WHAT WE DO IS DIFFERENT

The shift from traditional schools to continuously improving schools

While many schools have some pieces of the PartnersSI approach to teaching and learning in place, they are often not integrated or strategic. And, in many schools, elements like results-oriented leadership or an ongoing continuous improvement system are missing entirely. Combining these factors begs the question: How does a school enacting the PartnersSI theory of change look different from a “typical” urban school? The chart below highlights the contrast between status quo schools and districts with those who use our approach.

Status Quo Schools	PartnersSI Schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept as reality that some students learn to proficient levels and others do not. As a result, teachers teach to the middle without using assessment data to inform practice and differentiate learning. • Have teachers who accept responsibility for the students in their own classrooms, but not for all students meeting rigorous standards. • Provide teachers with mandates for curriculum fidelity and/or instructional strategies that are not necessarily aligned with teaching all students to master standards. • Send teachers to workshops off-site a few times per year; teachers try to implement what they have learned with limited support. • Give educators few forums to form professional relationships focused on teaching and student achievement. • Rely on hierarchical leadership, mainly from the principal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believe that all students can reach proficiency; set long- and short-term goals for achievement; monitor progress frequently at the classroom, grade and school levels; and, based on monitoring, adjust teaching accordingly from day to day. • Share responsibility for the success of all students in the school; advocate for clear, rigorous goals, high quality instruction, and reallocation of resources based on accelerating learning; share expertise. • Use data to measure the results and use results to support teachers to tailor teaching strategies so that each student can achieve standards mastery. • Support building focused, high-leverage expertise on school sites, in classrooms and through weekly grade-level collaboration. Teachers receive support for implementation from their peers and other experts to accelerate student learning. • Give educators many opportunities to build positive professional relationships through frequent collaboration focused on excellent teaching and building positive, culturally responsive relationships with students that lead to accelerated student achievement and standards mastery. • Expand leadership to include an active principal <i>and</i> teacher leaders and focus leadership at all levels on the support of learning and improvement.

VI. OUR APPROACH IN MORE DEPTH

Element one of the approach: implementing a strategic, integrated approach to teaching and learning

The PartnersSI approach to teaching and learning is founded on the following theory: if we provide rich, culturally relevant standards-based curriculum to our students in a way that continually takes into account and responds to all of their academic and affective strengths and needs, their achievement will accelerate, they will achieve standards mastery and they will be prepared for their futures. In order to ensure that this happens, we have developed a clear process for approaching teaching and learning called the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry, otherwise known as ROCI. What follows are the 11 major components of ROCI:

- 1) Know the standards
- 2) Diagnose student skills
- 3) Analyze diagnostic data to select focal students
- 4) Set Big Goals¹ for focal students
- 5) Allocate time and resources to reach goals
- 6) Backward plan for the ROCI cycle
- 7) Invest students in goals and build students' sense of efficacy
- 8) Plan weekly
- 9) Teach
- 10) Assess weekly
- 11) Analyze and reflect weekly

What follows is a more detailed description of these ROCI components and their rationale.

Knowing standards, diagnosing and selecting focal students

Literacy skills develop along a sequential pathway sometimes referred to as “the road to reading” or the “building blocks of literacy.” The English Language Arts content **standards** provide the map to this road and serve as “curricular guideposts for teachers.”² Having this map gives teachers a clear picture of where their students need to be by the end of each grade level. However, not all students in a grade level are in the same place along this pathway. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to **diagnose** each student’s strengths and needs to determine where to focus instruction to guide them in their journey toward mastery of grade-level standards. We work, in particular, with **focal students**. Focal students are five students in each class who are representative of the larger achievement and opportunity gaps in the school. For example, if English Learners are currently the school’s lowest-performing group, teachers will select focal students from this group in their classrooms. Once selected, teachers plan with focal students in mind. Teachers commit to learning about and getting to know these students so deeply that they are able to provide them with instruction that enables them to master rigorous standards and have a positive school experience. Knowing where focal students are academically in the beginning of the year and where they need to be by the end of the year is essential to effectively accelerate their learning. Standards provide the information about where students need to go and diagnostics tell us where they are starting in the beginning of the year.

Setting Big Goals, allocating resources and backward planning

Next, based on their knowledge of the standards and their analysis of diagnostic data, teachers collectively set goals and develop a “roadmap” for meeting them. First, teachers set and commit to accelerated year-end goals, which we call **Big Goals**, for their focal students that will drive their priorities and work for the year. Then, they work to **allocate instructional time and resources** to meet Big Goals. Finally, teachers create a long-term, purposeful plan for the year that breaks Big Goals into smaller objectives by using diagnostic data as the starting points and their Big Goals as the end points. This plan is called a **backward plan**. Each grade level team does this work collaboratively (at the beginning with a lot of support from PartnersSI staff). While

it may sound like tedious work, we have found that the time and effort teachers give to upfront planning toward meeting rigorous goals actually lessens their levels of stress associated with teaching and makes the daunting task of accelerating learning seem manageable.

Investing students in goals and building students' sense of efficacy

We work with teachers and school leaders explicitly to **invest students in their goals and to build students' sense of efficacy**. This is critically important because research shows that a chronic issue in most schools serving students of color is that there are deeply ingrained and biased understandings of race, cultural values around education, and intelligence, that contribute to a deficit orientation and low expectations. Sometimes this manifests itself blatantly and most times it is subtler, for example, when teachers try to shield students from achieving rigorous academic goals out of “sympathy for their situation.” This has a harmful impact on the extent to which students value themselves as learners and perceive their potential to succeed. Good and Brophy³ describe the self-fulfilling prophecy and cycle of failure that often result from such attitudes:

- 1) The school expects specific achievement from specific students (in this case, low achievement from students of color from low-income, urban backgrounds)
- 2) The school staff behaves toward students according to these expectations (e.g., devoting less time to instruction and more time to behavior management, asking easy questions instead of challenging questions to prompt critical thinking, etc.)
- 3) Students learn what is expected of them over time from the repeated behaviors of school staff
- 4) Students internalize the school staff's expectations, which informs their self-concept, motivation to succeed, and classroom conduct
- 5) Over time students' behaviors become more and more attuned to what the school (and in particular, teacher) expects
- 6) Student academic achievement is negatively affected.

We must set ambitious Big Goals for students, but we must also build students' sense of efficacy and self-worth so that they will stay motivated on an accelerated path to meet rigorous goals. Just as the cycle of failure can start and spiral, it can also reverse.

As one can see, investing students in goals is not as simple as making students aware of the goals we'd like them to reach—though this is also a highly effective and underutilized practice. Rather, students—especially those who are low-performing—need to believe in their own intrinsic intelligence and that others see them as intelligent and capable. If they do not perceive themselves as “smart” they will have little motivation to work toward their Big Goals, because they believe their effort won't make a difference. We work with teachers and leaders to increase motivation by targeting both students' beliefs in their abilities and their desire to learn. For example, every adult each student encounters should be regularly reinforcing students' beliefs in their own intelligence and potential. With increased confidence, students are likely to exert more effort, and with increased effort, students will experience greater success. With greater success, students' confidence will increase. This is how the cycle of success replaces the cycle of failure.

Planning, teaching, assessing and analyzing weekly

When teachers and school leaders have invested time into understanding grade-level standards, diagnosing their students' needs, backward planning for the year and beginning the work of investing students in their goals, they have laid crucial groundwork for accelerating student growth and have set themselves up to meet their Big Goals. The “what” (state standards and individual students' skills gaps) and the “why” (dramatically accelerating student learning to close the achievement gap) have been established. But the question remains: how can we ensure systematic implementation of the plans that have been made so that we guarantee that students meet Big Goals?

In backward planning, teachers lay out a big-picture map of the year that will lead to the achievement of Big Goals, but teams must meet weekly to plan how they will teach each skill and adjust their backward plan in response to assessment data. This “how” makes the difference between a brilliant roadmap that leads to powerful student results and a brilliant roadmap that sits on a shelf collecting dust while educators spin their wheels, frantically moving from week to week, unsure of whether or not they are on the right track. In order to stay focused on meeting Big Goals, it is important to prioritize and simplify the week-to-week planning and teaching process.

An effective team of teachers conducts weekly cycles of inquiry together: **planning, teaching, assessing** and adjusting according to the **analysis of focal student results**. Rather than focusing on a specific strategy or any one aspect of teacher practice, teachers who accelerate student learning typically focus on their students’ progress toward mastery of standards, collaborating once a week to reflect on results and planning strategically for the next week. If students aren’t learning, then teachers aren’t effectively teaching; teachers must measure the effectiveness of their lessons by whether or not students meet the objective they set out to teach.

Such a process allows teachers to stay focused on their Big Goals and to prioritize the things that will directly impact focal students’ progress toward those goals. Successful teachers are not deterred by the daily distractions, because they have a system in place that enables them to stay focused on student results. Everything these teachers do is driven by their determination to meet end-of-year goals.

Element two of the approach: advocating for and modeling culturally responsive mindsets

As we work with teachers and leaders each day, we strive to develop *culturally responsive mindsets* in ourselves and in others. This is critical. In our schools, 69% of students identify as Latino and 10% as African American. Fifty-four percent are English Language Learners and 71% are socio-economically disadvantaged.⁴ Based on national statistics, most public school leaders and teachers are not African American or Latino and have not come from low-income families where English is not the primary language. In California, roughly 75% of the teaching force is white. The experiences of our school leaders and teachers generally do not mirror the daily experiences of our students, and this is important to consider when we strive to create effective, engaging learning environments. It is critical that those working for educational equity have a means of analyzing their own cultural attitudes, assumptions and ways of being, and how these influence teaching and learning interactions with students from different backgrounds.

Historically, our schools and educators have largely operated within a belief system that perpetuates harmful stereotypes about a lower level of intelligence, motivation and value for education in African American and Latino children and their families. Teachers’ goals, methods of teaching, instructional choices and interactions with children are likely to be shaped by the norms of thought in this “dominant culture”⁵ and have traditionally been left unexamined. Culturally responsive teaching is based on the theory that culture is central to student learning. As scholar Geneva Gay explains, “...it is at once a routine and a radical proposal.”⁶ It is routine because it does for low-income students of color what conventional instructional practices do for middle class European American students. That is, it filters curriculum content and teaching strategies for students of color through *their* cultural frames of references, making content more personally meaningful and easier to process and master. It is radical in that it makes explicit the typically implicit role of culture in teaching and learning and insists that educational institutions accept the legitimacy of ethnic group cultures other than those that are Eurocentric to improve learning outcomes for students of color.

For our teachers to practice culturally responsive teaching, they need to understand how ethnically diverse students learn. And before they understand how ethnically diverse students learn they must genuinely believe these students are capable of learning and they as educators are capable of teaching for success. The end goal is for students to become cultural “code-switchers” so that without sacrificing their cultural identities they can

develop the academic skills, social behaviors and communication styles essential for high achievement in the mainstream U.S. education system.

Culturally responsive teaching and learning (CRTL) includes a broad set of principles that cover both mindsets and instruction. At PartnersSI, we focus first and foremost on developing *mindsets* as we coach teachers to implement our improvement approach. The following are the mindsets that we strive to model and develop in others as we work in schools:

- **Hold high expectations.** Set ambitious student learning goals and develop systems of shared responsibility so that both teacher and student know they can meet these goals with concerted effort.
- **Believe that failure is not an option.** Combine a positive attitude and high expectations to produce teacher-student interactions that involve:
 - a. Insisting students work harder when necessary,
 - b. Acknowledging students' efforts, and
 - c. Exerting effort toward preparing students for success.
- **Take an asset versus deficit orientation.** Acknowledge students' cultural heritages and daily realities and see these as providing students with a variety of strengths to build upon in school.
- **Cultivate an ethic of caring.** Develop caring, trusting relationships with all students and their families. It's common sense: the more students believe their teachers care about their academic progress and social well-being, the more motivated they are to learn.

Effective cultural communication. Finally, teachers' and students' abilities to communicate with one another can truly make or break student academic achievement. Culturally responsive teachers remind themselves of this golden principle: "Students may know much more than they are able to communicate, or they may be communicating much more than [I am] able to discern."⁷ We work with teachers to develop a mindset that will lead to more effective cultural communication through the tools and resources they have available to them.

Element 3 of the approach: developing results-oriented leadership

PartnersSI believes that dramatic, sustainable school and district improvement does not happen without leadership—and not just any brand of leadership. PartnersSI supports schools to develop leadership that is:

- **Results-oriented.** Leaders foster commitment to achieving results among all staff for all students in the school, specifically for low-performing students of color. They use results to guide all decision-making and make getting results for traditionally low-performing students the basis for making all decisions.
- **Responsible for learning.** In order to achieve these results, leaders are responsible for leading the learning of others. Their job is not to be experts in teaching first and foremost—though this is a great bonus—but rather to be experts in monitoring and pushing toward results: What standards did you teach today? Did they learn them? If not, what can we do differently or better so that they will?
- **Expanded.** Leadership is expanded—that is, more people on-site have leadership responsibility. In this way, teachers have more access to support and collaborative learning, *and* teachers and coaches learn key leadership skills.

What does effective school leadership look like? It consists of multiple roles and layers, each of which is responsible for supporting teachers to improve their expertise and performance to accelerate achievement. PartnersSI uses the term "distributed leadership" to describe the multiple roles and layers encompassed in the improvement system.

The principal

Principals are ultimately responsible for modeling results-oriented leadership and leading the learning of others. Research consistently shows that strong, active principals are essential to increasing student achievement.⁸ The need for principals to act as learning leaders is clear; strong collaboration and instructional monitoring skills have replaced bureaucratic skills as the key attributes of effective principals.⁹

A focus on learning

Based on research and experience, we know that the principals must act as learning leaders to accelerate improvement in teacher performance and student learning. As Mike Schmoker points out, “...a focus on learning, on assessment results, becomes the leverage for improvements in teaching, which is only as good as its impact on learning. When leadership is focused on results, on urging a formal, frequent review of the impact of instruction, teaching improves.”¹⁰ To be an effective learning leader, the principal must be actively involved in knowing whether focal students are meeting weekly goals and following up with teachers when they aren’t. This, in turn, requires that they rely on mid-level leadership to help them accomplish the additional demands on their time. Mid-level leaders who work collaboratively and effectively with the principal and their peers are critically important to achieving results. In every interaction, the principal cultivates commitment to and holds teachers accountable for student learning results.

Mid-level leadership

If leadership is to support teacher learning, schools must expand leadership at the mid-level, that is, expand leadership roles beyond the principal.¹¹ In distributing leadership, teachers, coaches and even parents and students take on leadership roles in the school—though right now PartnersSI focuses on teachers and teacher coaches as mid-level leaders. The following are some common forms of mid-level leadership:

- **Grade-level leaders.** Our work at improving teaching and learning is largely focused at the grade and classroom levels. To sustain ROCI, teachers must take leadership. Grade-level leaders are particularly well suited to lead the learning of their peers: they have a deep understanding of the skills that students at that grade must acquire and know the grade-level standards well.
- **Teacher coaches.** Mid-level leaders, depending on their expertise, provide classroom coaching for teachers over the course of the ROCI process. They can model strategies and help grade-level teams critically examine assessment data and student work. The most effective mid-level leaders possess a combination of leadership skills to manage the change process and instructional and content knowledge that enable them to improve the quality of teaching through direct coaching of teachers.

The leadership team

PartnersSI helps schools either form or strengthen a leadership team. Leadership teams can take several forms. In some schools, representatives from each grade level, literacy coaches and the principal comprise the leadership team. In other schools, it’s a smaller group made up of the principal and several mid-level leaders. In this example, this smaller group makes the decisions, consulting either with the full staff or a group of grade level representatives for input. The primary responsibility of the leadership team is to lead improvement efforts underway at the school. The leadership team, for example, must examine the issues, progress and challenges arising in grade level work, and support grade-level leaders in solving them—all the time with eyes focused on accelerating achievement and getting results.

A new kind of leadership

Traditionally, school leadership has consisted of focusing on managing the operations of the school site, including overseeing the physical plant, interacting with teachers through staff meetings and attempting to influence the quality of teaching through infrequent teacher evaluations and resolving problems as they arise. In the PartnersSI approach, leaders are not only accountable for getting results—but also for ensuring that the school community is learning from its results. Did students achieve? If not, why not? What can we do

differently? If they did achieve, what can we learn about what the teacher(s) did well? Success or failure in getting student achievement results does not result in reward or punishment. Instead, success or failure trigger *learning*, and principals and other leaders hold themselves and teachers accountable for applying that learning to get even better results in a rigorous but supportive environment.

If this is true, how do school leaders (principal, mid-level and leadership teams) spend their time? On what do they focus their own and others' attention?

- **Leaders focus attention on results.** One of the primary responsibilities of school leaders is to make it very clear that the school's goal is to improve student learning and close the achievement gap for students of color. They continually focus the attention of everyone in the school community on this goal, in all instructional spaces in the school—classrooms, grade-level team meetings, leadership team meetings, parent meetings, etc. Leaders construct learning activities for adults that explicitly focus on achieving results: analyzing student assessment data, developing culturally responsive mindsets to guide teaching and learning, setting and working toward Big Goals and backward planning to meet Big Goals, building students' sense of efficacy and allocating time and resources to meet goals. Leaders continually bring the focus of adult interactions, issues and relationships back to student learning; in doing so, they must enable adults to put aside their differences and personal preferences in the interests of their students.¹²
- **Leaders monitor student performance and growth.** Effective school leaders hold themselves and each other accountable for getting learning results. Instead of asking teachers, "Did your lesson go as planned?" they ask, "Did the students learn what you intended to teach?" If the answer is no, they ask further, "How can we work together to ensure that they learn it the next time you teach it?" Results-oriented principals know on an on-going basis which students are learning on pace to meet standards and which students need differentiated support.
- **Leaders model effective use of adult learning time.** Strong leaders model effective use of structures and processes for adult learning. For example, professional learning in PartnersSI schools is made up of a series of activities: weekly grade-level meetings, model lessons, classroom coaching and staff meetings, to name a few. Leaders at the school are responsible for organizing and leading these activities so that they stay focused on student learning.
- **Leaders work to get everyone authentically involved in improvement.** Many school leaders struggle with the resistance to change among staff. While some of this reluctance comes from the stress of a large workload or fear of the unknown, it can also result from believing that "it can't be done." Effective principals view resistance as normal and healthy, use it as a catalyst and work with it to garner incremental, authentic commitment from staff. Strong leaders generate "short-term wins" as soon as possible to provide teachers with evidence that their participation will help them reach their goals.
- **Leaders allocate resources to achieve results.** Student learning is dependent on resources: time for teachers to learn together, to develop content expertise or to work with coaches, the principal and PartnersSI staff to improve their teaching—and, thus, student learning. For the system to succeed, leaders must allocate resources—amount of time scheduled for teaching and re-teaching when some students need more instruction, money for interventions and English Language Development support, for example—to support student learning. This always requires shifting priorities, constant reflection about what is working or not working and frequent change to respond in a timely manner to the needs of students.
- **Leaders monitor teacher performance and growth.** Leaders are also responsible for monitoring how well teachers are teaching—what are their strengths, areas for growth, and what specific professional development or coaching they need. They follow through with coaching and support for teachers who need it most. They demand that their teachers get better and better every day.

- **Leaders constantly use the information they gather to monitor the performance of the overall system.** Good leaders are constantly asking and analyzing: Is student achievement accelerating at my school? What is causing this acceleration and what is diminishing it? This accounting of results is a key function of the *school-wide* Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry. If the system is not working for low-performing students, then leadership is responsible for making adjustments to the system.
- **Leaders cultivate new values.** Leaders cultivate in their staff and school community a results-orientation, culturally responsive mindsets and a sense of shared responsibility for all students. They help teachers value the use of time for collaborative learning and preparation. They encourage risk-taking in group activities, rather than retreating to the isolation and safety of closed classrooms. They remind teachers and staff of the moral purpose behind our effort. They celebrate success. They always ask: Are we accelerating learning for our students of color? How do we know? What can we do differently to get even better results?
- **Working with school district leadership.** It is becoming clear from research and examples across the country that district leadership can make a profound difference in student achievement—either positively or negatively. PartnersSI has begun to focus attention at the district level, so that district policies and resources facilitate accelerating the achievement of underserved students within its schools.

The district office, in PartnersSI’s view, must set the “essential conditions” for these systems to develop. We work with school districts to positively influence the following conditions:

- A set of clear expectations for equitable achievement and closing the achievement gap that schools and the surrounding community understand, believe in and take action toward
- The allocation of additional resources—literacy coaches and the highest quality teachers, for example—to low-performing schools, as well as time dedicated to collaboration
- The use of standards as the instructional framework and support for schools to implement a standards-based approach effectively to bring each child to standards mastery
- Opportunities for high quality professional development (both site-based and cross-site) for teachers and administrators at all levels of the system
- Data system infrastructure and support for the timely use of data to drive decision-making
- Aligned professional development, assessments and instruction so schools can work from a coherent foundation
- Productive negotiations with the teachers’ union to ensure that the union is supporting structures for enhanced teacher professional development and placing high quality teachers with the students who need them most
- Leadership development opportunities for educators at all levels of the system
- Streamlined business processes so that distraction to principals from instructional matters is as limited as possible
- A climate of political support and sustained community focus on accelerating learning and closing the achievement gap
- A system and structures for ongoing analysis and learning from the schools’ implementation experience and a way of applying the learning to guide continuous improvement at the district level (in essence, a district-level Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry)

The commitment to student achievement and closing the achievement gap must be championed and communicated by those in charge—beginning with the superintendent and the school board. Without this focus from the top, district support for schools is unlikely to be aligned to similar goals at the school level.

More on the district’s leadership of principals

The district is the school’s strongest ally in sustaining its capacity for continuous improvement. The district, especially in the long-term, given its authority and control of policy and resources, is positioned to expect, reward, support, and staff the kind of continuous improvement described above. One of the most important aspects of the district role is the development and guidance of its principals.

Where possible, PartnersSI works closely with districts to operate in a much more substantive role than simply holding principals accountable for results. It is not sufficient for districts to *ask* principals about gaps in achievement by grade level, for example. Districts must encourage principals to make judgments about how to close those gaps. In doing so, the district contributes to the professional development of the principal. This involves setting new expectations for the principal’s role—that they are to lead the learning of teachers in order to *actually* achieve the student learning goals that they set each year. The district can also help by creating incentives and rewards for principals to take on instructional leadership, finding ways to streamline or do away with administrative duties and helping the principal to prioritize his time to support leadership and monitoring student learning.

However, creating the conditions for principal development is not enough; districts must directly support and develop principals. If they are to sustain continuous improvement, district staff cannot *tell* principals how to implement improved systems for leadership and teacher learning—they must *model* for them how to do this themselves. In this way, the district, just like school-level educators, takes on new responsibilities for leading the learning throughout the system. In the ideal, district representatives assigned to a school would coach and mentor the principal to be effective in getting results. The urban school systems that have made the greatest progress on restructuring to improve teacher practice and close the achievement gap (such as Boston, Charlotte, and San Diego and District 2 in New York under Tony Alvarado’s leadership) re-conceptualized their role in this way.

VI. SUSTAINING THE WORK

The apprenticeship model

If schools and districts are to become the kinds of places described in this document, educators have a lot to learn. The work involves setting new goals, developing new skills and taking on new perspectives. As they learn, they will need significant support, especially at the beginning.

PartnersSI works with educators until they can sustain continuous improvement on their own. We do so through the use of an apprenticeship model. This model, or technique, is a developmental way of teaching and learning a new set of skills.

The purpose of the apprenticeship model is three-fold:

- Develop the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary so that educators can effectively improve the teaching and learning at the school
- Get results quickly in order to stimulate and expand willingness to engage in our approach to teaching and learning
- Ensure that educators can sustain the effort without support from PartnersSI

Why the apprenticeship model is important

It is one thing to know that making certain changes will benefit low-performing students; it is another to take action to make those changes. Helping educators make the transition from *knowledge* to *action* can be challenging. PartnersSI supports schools and districts on both sides of this “knowing-doing gap,” as we work to build effective systems that will lead to results. In short, we take on significant administration, organization, coordination and facilitation for an extended period, until educators can internalize and carry out an ongoing improvement process without outside help. We see this aspect of our work with schools and districts as most critical: if educators do not receive intensive coaching on implementation, their hard work is likely to be met with limited success.

The apprenticeship approach does not only build skill. We also use it to build belief that “it can be done.” Our experience has shown us that with intensive coaching on implementation¹³, educators will quickly see success in the form of accelerated learning for focal students. Moving quickly toward “small wins” in the beginning of our work with schools is part of our strategy to build belief in and ownership of the change process. As we work with schools over the course of several years, we move from small wins to big wins, eventually tackling larger and deeper teaching and learning issues at the school, and expanding implementation of our approach from a few grade levels in a school to all grade levels. When teachers see their students experiencing success—even small successes in the beginning—they become advocates and are more willing to participate themselves.

The goal of the apprenticeship model is to move educators from a mechanical understanding of our approach to deep understanding and moral commitment so that they can sustain the work for years to come and experience significant success along the way. As educators gain facility in using our approach to change, they are able to innovate in ways that make sense for their contexts and build an even stronger culture of achievement at their schools.

For a detailed discussion of the apprenticeship model, please see the endnotes section.¹⁴

VII. TENSIONS WE FACE IN OUR WORK

Though the work of PartnersSI has led to enormous and exciting achievements and measurable growth at many schools, our work is filled with tensions that create, at times, significant challenges. The tensions associated with attempting to thoughtfully impact teacher practice in the No Child Left Behind era come into play on a daily basis in PartnersSI’s work with schools, most of which are Program Improvement schools under State or Federal sanctions. For example, we have worked in schools in which individuals have placed such a high premium on standardized test scores that some teachers spent more time helping their students learn how to answer multiple choice questions than they did deepening their students’ critical thinking skills and understanding of the standards. The conflicts we feel are many. What follows are four examples of ways in which PartnersSI staff experience tension in our work.

- **Misinterpretation of ROCI (our approach) as another outside “layer.”** Given the number of initiatives imposed on teachers, it is easy to understand how teachers would feel like engaging in ROCI is yet another layer of reform efforts that is imposed from the “outside.” One of the most critical keys to success is enabling teachers and leaders to make our approach their own: to build a continuous improvement system that is led by the school and meets the school’s needs. This means striking the balance between ensuring that our research-based, multi-component approach is implemented—but that implementation is consistent with the school’s culture and goals. To do this, we must be excellent coaches, who build meaningful and strategic relationships with teachers and leaders and ask the right questions of our clients to build the desire for improvement and a real need to engage in the components of our approach described earlier in the document. In this way, schools

become part of—*leaders of*—a process that they see as necessary. Making this happen is a delicate process, however. We are constantly striving to get better at it.

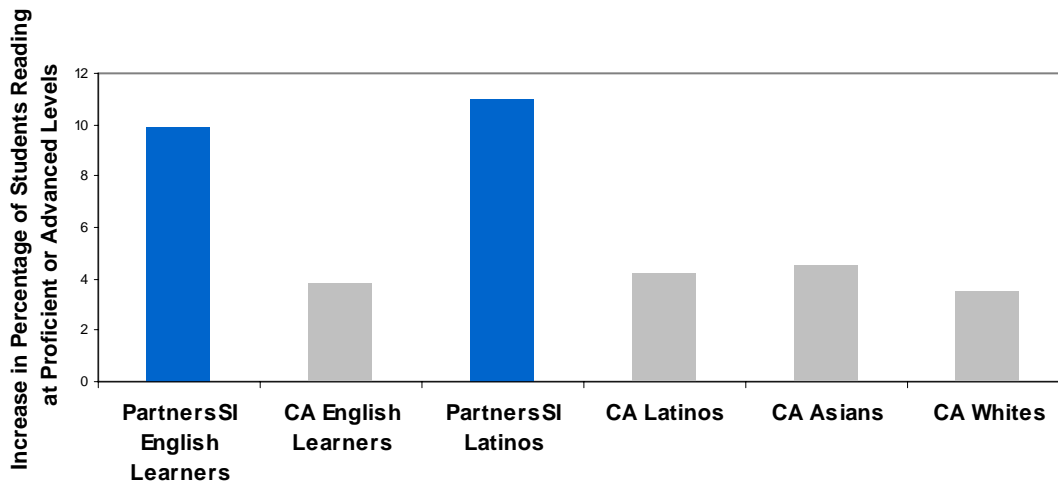
- **Metrics of success.** The high stakes accountability system in California is keyed to performance on the California Standards Test (CST). PartnersSI believes this is only one of many important indicators of student, teacher and school success. Even the state-adopted, standards-aligned curriculum and assessments are only partially aligned to the high stakes CST. Furthermore, there are no consistent metrics that capture the many outcomes of student learning that aren't captured by a standardized test such as the student's critical thinking and problem-solving skills, motivation, engagement and love for learning. We are continually exploring how we can build our capacity to measure *all* of the important elements of instruction and a strong school culture.
- **Timeline for results.** Schools need to show results in the short-term to get out of Program Improvement status. Yet developing the systems and mindset for ongoing improvement can take three to five years. PartnersSI believes that implementing our approach well will lead to both short-term results and long-term sustainability, but striking the right balance is tricky.
- **Selection of focal students.** At times districts choose the “basic” level or “bubble” students as focal students in order to bump them up to proficient on the standardized assessment, and unintentionally widen the achievement gap as the lowest performing students fall farther behind. While there can be a strong, data-based rationale for selecting bubble students, a tension occurs when the primary motivation to select these students is to improve standardized test scores for external accountability and political reasons.

PartnersSI attempts to help schools and districts fundamentally change their culture. It is important to understand these tensions to effectively adapt our approach to individual school contexts.

VIII. CONCLUSION: OUR APPROACH IS WORKING

For over a decade, PartnersSI has worked to achieve educational excellence for all children while closing the achievement gap. Our focus on improving teaching and leadership has achieved some exciting results, and we are learning that our approach is making a difference in the schools we serve. For example, since the year 2005, the gap between English Learner students in PartnersSI schools and White students across California has reduced by 15% points each year. The gap between Latino students in PartnersSI schools and White students across California has reduced by 9% points.

PartnersSI Schools Dramatically Narrow the Achievement Gap From 2005 to 2007



11 out of 14 partner schools achieved greater gains compared to similar schools on the Academic Performance Index—California’s measurement for the academic growth of a school. Furthermore, schools with which we’ve partnered for over 5 years have doubled the state average gains (26% versus 13%) in percentage of students reading at grade level over that time. 8 out of 14 partner schools achieved 5 percentage points or more growth in students reading at proficient or advanced levels school-wide compared to the district average of 1 percentage point in San Francisco and 0.40 percentage points in San Jose Unified—the most significant increase across our schools from any prior year.

And so while we are encouraged by the promising data for two of our target populations—English Learners and Latino students—and know that the schools that most closely implemented our continuous school improvement approach showed the greatest results, our schools face the sobering realization that there is still much work to do to close the achievement gap. As a learning-oriented organization, we face the realization that our work is far from done and we have so much more to learn to be successful. Even for our schools experiencing the greatest gains, the achievement gap will not close for over a decade if we maintain the same rate of growth. While we realize that fundamental systems change is a lengthy process, we are committed to demonstrating the urgency of accelerating the learning of students at the bottom of the achievement gap through our work in schools.

Endnotes

¹ Teach for America. *Teaching as Leadership*. Washington, D.C: Teach for America, 2007.

² California Department of Education. *Reading Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools*, Sacramento, CA: The California Department of Education, 2006.

³ Good, T.L., & Brophy, J.E. *Looking in classrooms* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1984

⁴ Data_retrieved July 16, 2007 from <http://www.greatschools.net>.

⁵ Dominant culture may be defined as the culture of power belonging to those who have historically had greater advantages and access to resources in a society. In the U.S. this group has been White, middle class men.

⁶ Gay, G. *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 78.

⁸ United States, Educational Resources Information Center (U.S.), and Policy Studies Associates. *Hope for Urban Education A Study of Nine High-Performing, High-Poverty Urban Elementary Schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service, 1999.

⁹ Drake, Thelbert L., and William Henry Roe. *The Principalship*. New York: Macmillan, 1986.

¹⁰ Mike Schmoker, *Results Now*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006.

¹¹ Although few specifics are available, studies of effective schools cite the importance of shared leadership. For example, in the study by the Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC, cited above, researchers found that these schools were characterized by shared, participatory leadership. School leadership did not reside in a single person, and several schools had leadership teams that included teachers. These leaders were clear about their vision and were able to communicate it to their faculties.

In the Educational Resources Information Center cited above (1999), researchers found that the quantity and quality of time spent on instructional leadership activities increased. Principals spent more time helping teachers attend to instructional issues. Also, principals put other educators in positions that allowed them to provide instructional leadership.

In their evaluation of PSAA, researchers from AIR found that where teachers had the guidance and monitoring of their progress by instructional leaders, they were better able to institute the common curricular and instructional coherence that was linked to improve achievement.

Corallo and McDonald also cite studies that find that distributed leadership is essential to maximizing student achievement; shared vision and clearly identified school goals are essential to this distribution of leadership.

¹² The Educational Resources Information Center (1999), in its study of high-performing, high poverty schools, found that school leaders redirected energy that was being spent on conflicts between adults in the school toward service to children. Leaders appealed to teachers, support staff and parents to put aside their own interests and focus on serving children well.

¹³ Schmoker, M "Tipping Point: From Feckless Reform to Substantive Instructional Improvement" *Phi Delta Kappan* 85 (6) (2004): p. 424-432.

¹⁴ The idea of an apprenticeship model comes from the world of instruction where teachers put in place scaffolds for students and "gradually release" more and more responsibility until they master new content and skills. This approach is grounded in Vygotsky's concept of teaching in the zone of proximal development and gradually releasing responsibility to the learner¹⁴. As Schoenbach et al describe,

In any apprenticeship, an expert practitioner or mentor consciously models, directs, supports, and shapes an apprentice's growing repertoire of practice. The apprentice actively engages in the task, learning by doing with appropriate support and gradually moving toward skillful independence in the desired practice. A number of learning contexts offer examples, from water skiing to cooking, from conducting an orchestra to performing surgery.

Some researchers studying novice and expert performance on a variety of mental tasks have adopted the metaphor of "cognitive apprenticeship" to describe a type of teaching designed to assist students in acquiring more proficient cognitive processes for such valued tasks as reading comprehension, composing and mathematical problem solving. If students are to become skilled readers of academic texts, the invisible processes involved in comprehending such texts must be made visible and accessible to them as they actually engage in meaningful literacy activities.

In classrooms, teachers re-conceptualize the learning of literacy as an apprenticeship in discipline-based practices of thinking, talking, reading and writing. But the purpose of the PartnersSI apprenticeship, rather than helping students learn academic skills, is to help educators learn new leadership and instructional skills around the acceleration of low-performing students. Similar to a teacher working with a student, our *apprenticeship model* also offers scaffolds and supports. Teachers and administrators gradually take over, as they master new skills and understanding.

The PartnersSI apprenticeship model is made up of three stages:

1. Modeled Practice
2. Guided Practice
3. Independent Practice

The *apprenticeship model* applies across our work – to a grade-level teacher learning how to use instructional practices effectively with focal students, to a team member learning how to present student work to her peers, to a grade-level leader learning to run team meetings or to a principal learning to support the leadership team and teachers throughout the school. The model can even apply to teams learning how to interact effectively, or a district representative learning how to support principals.

Although PartnersSI is heavily involved in the "expert" role or "knowledgeable partner" in the early phases of implementation, other individuals will eventually take on these roles. For example, a grade-level leader, once he or she has built expertise, may apprentice a new teacher as he or she learns how to conduct a cycle. The principal may serve in the role of knowledgeable partner to show the ropes to a new grade-level leader. District literacy coaches might apprentice grade-level leaders or principals around these same activities. For this reason, the model is not meant to be limited to PartnersSI's role, but rather represents a way for educators to play key roles in one another's learning.

Individuals or teams may pass through these stages more quickly or more slowly, depending on any number of factors: their expertise, the achievement levels of their students, even their relationships with one another. To illustrate the model, we work through an example below of apprenticeship for grade-level leaders around ROCL. For the sake of clarity, the illustration below assumes that grade-level leaders can pass on to the next stage with each new cycle.

Stage 1: Modeled practice. In this first stage, the grade-level leader is an active observer and the PartnersSI staff, principal and/or literacy coach, sometimes working in combination, lead all aspects of the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry (the role of the knowledgeable partner). In essence, this first time through is a demonstration of how to lead the cycle for the grade-level leader, similar to an expert teacher demonstrating an instructional

practice for peers in the classroom. For example, they schedule grade-level team meetings, notify teachers of meeting plans and organize agendas. They might prepare a teacher in advance to present student work at a meeting or prepare packets of assessment data for teachers to analyze. They facilitate the grade-level meetings and model new norms of interaction. They organize lab classrooms and facilitate group discussions at the conclusion of the lesson.

We not only model how to do the “tasks” of leadership, such as how to coordinate meetings, but also the skills of effectively leading groups. For example, when a facilitator comes to the team with a good idea, but it doesn’t suit them, what does she do? Back off, or push forward, given that the initial reaction to new ideas, even good ones, is often reluctance? Our school-based staff demonstrates how to use strategies and techniques to get the team to learn together effectively.

The grade-level leader participates like any member of the team in the lab classroom and grade-level team dialogues. She actively observes and absorbs the modeled practice. She interacts with others on the team to better understand the modeled strategies.

In this first stage, our staff is as transparent as possible about what kinds of strategies and techniques they are using. They meet with the grade-level leader to explain their thinking and choices around key strategies.

Stage 2: Guided practice. During the second cycle, the grade-level leader begins to take over leadership. Our staff “guides practice;” we provide a high level of assistance and coaching throughout the cycle. We might, for example, review agendas beforehand with the grade-level leader and remind him or her to arrange for subs for the lab classroom. We might advise the grade-level leader on how to prep the principal for participation in the grade-level meetings. PartnerSI staff attends team meetings and often jump in or back up the grade-level leader to clarify confusion or work through challenges during facilitation. They keep the grade-level leader’s developmental skill level in mind, and provide direct coaching and feedback outside of meetings, as necessary. Our staff help the grade-level leaders to reflect on the progress of the cycle or particular meetings.

The grade-level leader begins to organize, coordinate and facilitate the cycle independently, but checks in regularly with school-based PartnersSI staff. He or she looks to PartnersSI staff often to encourage its participation during meetings and Lab Classrooms. He or she listens to and responds to reflective questioning from the knowledgeable partners, and incorporates insights into leadership activities.

Stage 3: Independent practice. During the third cycle, the grade-level leader acts “independently.” Our staff is still close at hand, so that the grade-level leader has regular access to our support. We continue to attend all grade-level meetings and support change in various ways, but we do not provide such active coaching. We wait for the grade-level leader to ask for or prompt our participation during meetings, but may continue to provide some preparation support “behind the scenes.”

The grade-level leader tries to lead all aspects of the cycle independently, but asks for clarification if need be. S/he initiates discussions of the finer points of leading the cycle with our staff as we debrief progress and key activities. In response, we ask extending questions to prompt deep understanding. The grade-level leader begins to use his or her own insights about teacher learning to make adjustments to her or his leadership. S/he begins to select strategies and techniques appropriate to the circumstances, and seeks the input of her/his grade-level peers to ensure that her/his guidance of their learning is effective.

