



Literacy  
Organizational  
Capacity  
Initiative

NORC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



## A LEADER'S GUIDE TO BUILDING INSTRUCTIONAL CAPACITY

ESSA's new language on professional development provides an opening for districts to rethink their approach to teacher learning to focus less on implementing specific programs and more on building lasting capacity for instructional improvement. This white paper from the Literacy Organizational Capacity Initiative (LOCI) analyzes the professional learning systems of four high capacity districts and distills a framework of 11 common factors. The framework presented in this white paper can be used by school districts to increase the coherence, ownership, and effective implementation of your instructional vision.

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## INTRODUCTION: Capacity, Not Compliance

Quality teaching matters, but do we know how to help teachers achieve it? A recent spate of reports has raised the question, once again, of whether the billions of dollars spent each year on teacher professional development make a difference for student learning.<sup>i</sup> New language in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides an opportunity for districts to rethink their approach and focus on what works. Professional development (PD) is described in ESSA as “sustained (not stand-alone and short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, classroom-focused.” This definition shifts thinking about PD in the direction of building sustainable capacity.

The debate about educational improvement can be broadly framed as a contrast between compliance-driven and capacity-driven strategies. Change strategies powered by compliance and/or incentives (including NCLB) focus on individuals and assume they need to be pressured to change. Capacity-driven strategies focus on systems and assume that individuals and groups in the system have an intrinsic, mission-driven motivation to change, given the right supports. Using the capacity lens can help districts develop change strategies that ensure that people and teams in the system can understand, implement, and learn from the change, not simply execute procedures.

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## METHODOLOGY: Identifying Common Assets of High Capacity Districts



This paper draws on a series of nationally representative surveys and a set of four district-level case studies designed to identify common characteristics of districts with capacity-based professional learning systems. The work began with three national surveys conducted from 2012–2015.<sup>ii</sup> We used these surveys to identify districts that were making the most progress with the implementation of new literacy standards and then pinpoint what set those districts apart in terms of their professional learning systems, including leadership practices, approaches to curriculum, professional learning investments, and professional culture.

We call these features “assets” because they are the building blocks of professional learning systems that drive improvements in teaching and learning. The national survey findings established a blueprint for capacity-driven professional learning systems, but left us with practical questions about how districts develop and operate such systems. The research reported here was undertaken to provide more detailed, nuanced portraits of capacity-driven professional learning systems. Using a mixed-methods case study approach, we take specific assets of district capacity that were highlighted in our survey research and look closely at how they operate in the context of four district professional learning systems.

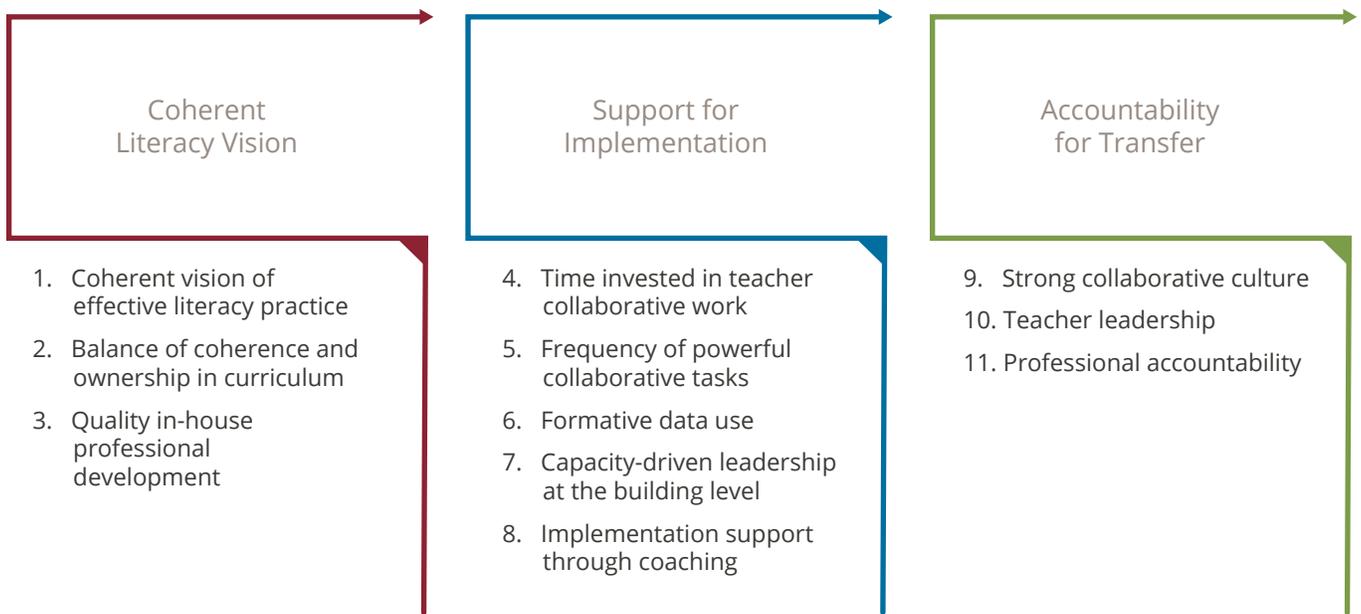
We circulated our working definition of “capacity-driven districts” to 30+ national professional learning organizations and foundations, soliciting nominations of districts that fit the profile. After a round of preliminary interviews and document review, we selected four districts for in-depth investigation. Major data elements of the case studies in each district included:

- Interviews with district-level literacy leaders;
- Teachers and building-level instructional leaders completed our benchmark survey, allowing us to compare the levels of specific capacity factors in the case study districts to national levels;
- Site visits to three Title I schools in each district, including interviews with administration, literacy coaches, teacher leaders, and grade and subject teams.

We analyzed the professional learning systems in the four districts by looking at how each district accomplished key capacity tasks:

- Building educator knowledge and skills around a specific **vision** of effective literacy teaching and learning;
- **Supporting** educators in the implementation of that vision (through coaching and structured collaboration); and
- Ensuring **accountability** for transfer of effective practices to classrooms and continuous improvement of those practices.

## WITHIN THE OVERALL FRAME OF VISION/SUPPORT/ACCOUNTABILITY, THE SPECIFIC ASSETS WE EXPLORE ARE:



One of our key findings was that each of these high-functioning districts had a different mix of assets, and no one district had them all in place. So the report also includes perspectives on what these districts have learned about practices that undermine some of the assets.

The report begins with a table summarizing the strategies in our case study districts that did and did not contribute to the development of each of the 11 assets. We then examine each asset in detail, drawing on our national benchmark data to provide context, then focusing on how these specific districts developed and maintained each aspect of their professional learning systems.

## Builds Capacity

## Does Not Build Capacity

		Builds Capacity	Does Not Build Capacity
1	 <i>Coherent vision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stick with structures and processes long enough to let them work</li> <li>Learn and adapt within a clear framework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No clear vision of effective instruction</li> <li>Vision too abstract, not clearly connected to classroom practice</li> <li>Initiative overload</li> <li>Short timeline for success</li> </ul>
2	 <i>Balance of coherence and ownership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers are involved in developing and shaping goals</li> <li>Innovating towards a common goal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Site-level and classroom autonomy untethered from a shared goal</li> <li>Vision mandated from top down, monitored for fidelity of implementation</li> <li>Vision based on packaged approach or purchased curriculum</li> </ul>
3	 <i>In-house PD</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cycle of learning focused on one topic</li> <li>Led by internal experts</li> <li>Focus on application in context</li> <li>Grounded in consistent vision of effective pedagogy</li> <li>Includes time to collaborate with peers</li> <li>Models targeted pedagogy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One shot events on multiple topics</li> <li>Reliance on external trainers</li> <li>Focus on transmission of knowledge</li> <li>Focus on learning to use specific strategies or products</li> <li>Lecture-style pedagogy</li> </ul>
4	 <i>Time for collaboration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Everyone participates, on the clock</li> <li>Time is respected</li> <li>Agendas and routines to use time well</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participation is optional</li> <li>Time is pre-empted</li> <li>Time is unstructured</li> </ul>
5	 <i>Collaborative tasks</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tightly connected to daily instructional practice</li> <li>Co-creation of lessons and assessments is frequent</li> <li>Reflection grounded in examination of student work</li> <li>Looks forward and back- how can we teach this? How did they learn it?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited to planning at the outline level</li> <li>No continuity of learning from week to week</li> </ul>
6	 <i>Data work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Frequent and formative</li> <li>Gets to problem solving and instructional implications</li> <li>Teams generate/own data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focused on summative assessments</li> <li>Limited to problem identification</li> <li>Data come from outside the instructional cycle</li> </ul>
7	 <i>Capacity-driven building leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leaders learn with teacher teams</li> <li>Leaders protect time for collaboration</li> <li>Leaders demonstrate commitment to collaboration through consistent participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leaders pre-empt collaboration time with other work</li> <li>Leader dictates team agendas</li> </ul>
8	 <i>Implementation support through coaching</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focused on shared vision</li> <li>Support for effective implementation of PD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fragmented, on-demand</li> <li>Deficit model</li> </ul>
9	 <i>Strong collaborative culture</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Balance of trust and challenge</li> <li>Transparency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Private practice</li> <li>Safety trumps other norms</li> </ul>
10	 <i>Teacher leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal and informal roles</li> <li>Investment in developing leadership skills</li> <li>Focused on leadership among colleagues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited to "input"</li> <li>Focused on external networks</li> </ul>
11	 <i>Accountability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defined by professionalism</li> <li>Functions through shared responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defined by compliance</li> <li>Functions through monitoring, rewards, and sanctions</li> </ul>



## Asset 1: Coherent Vision of Effective Literacy Practice

### What is it?

**Shared agreement at all levels of the system about what effective teaching and learning in literacy looks like, at a level that is concrete and specific enough to guide everything from daily classroom practice to broad curriculum frameworks to investments in professional development.**

Coherence is widely acknowledged as critical to educational systems but remains elusive for many districts. A coherent vision of effective literacy instruction serves as a shared language and decision making framework for investments in time and money across all levels of the system. While most districts have some kind of mission statement or vision for literacy, it is rarely concrete enough to guide action. In the absence of a concrete, shared vision, the void is often filled by implicit ideas about literacy embedded in purchased curricula. Without open dialogue about what effective literacy practice looks like, and frequent opportunities to compare vision and actual practice, administrators and teachers may interpret and apply these in widely different ways.

Our benchmark for coherent literacy vision is 70%+ of teachers and administrators agreeing with the statement “My district articulates a few clear priorities for literacy teaching and learning.” Districts meeting this benchmark had some critical commonalities:

- Widely shared understanding that literacy development is central to the job of every educator, across grade levels, departments and roles, and is not the sole responsibility of elementary and ELA teachers.
- Coherence was not imposed from the top down by purchasing a particular curriculum product or training teachers in a specific approach then requiring implementation fidelity. Rather, it emerged over time from multi-level internal conversations.
- District leaders, building administrators, and teachers engaged in shared learning about literacy practice.
- Investment in multiple rounds of curriculum mapping, with extensive teacher involvement, providing a framework within which the shared understanding of effective literacy instruction could continue to evolve.
- Process improvement mentality, consciously sticking with structures and processes for a long time, learning and adapting along the way. Often reinforced by leadership stability.



## Asset 2: Balance of Coherence and Ownership in Literacy Curriculum

### What is it?

**A vision of effective literacy practice that is coherent but not static. Coherence is achieved through an ongoing, multi-level dialogue about what the vision looks like in practice. Within a clear, shared framework, teacher teams operate as expert professionals who work to adapt and apply the vision to the needs of their particular students. Teams of teachers continually engage the vision as they translate it into specific choices about curriculum and pedagogy.**

Rather than achieving coherence through top-down mandates or a “fidelity of implementation” approach, capacity-driven districts structure an ongoing conversation about effective literacy practice. This conversation takes place at multiple levels and in diverse forums: in district and school-level professional development, through the curriculum mapping process, and, most importantly, in the day to day planning of grade-level and subject area teams who work together to put the vision into practice. Such structures promote ongoing reflection on and development of literacy practices, but within a clear framework, so that colleagues across classrooms, grade levels, and schools evolve in the same direction.

Having strong norms of teacher ownership and the structures in place to support it proved especially important as districts went through the transition to new literacy standards. In our national research, many teachers expressed feeling overwhelmed at the standards being one more thing added to already full plates. In the two study districts with high levels of both coherence and ownership, a clear literacy vision helped teachers focus on central instructional shifts, while structures for teacher ownership gave them time and space to “learn their way into” the specifics.

In the third study district, teachers had high ownership over literacy pedagogy and curriculum, but low coherence of practice across classrooms, both the result of a strong norm of autonomy for individual teachers. And in the fourth multiple, frequently shifting mandates left teachers feeling that they had neither clear expectations nor freedom to exercise their own professional judgment. In both scenarios, without the balance of coherence and ownership, the standards transition was producing higher levels of frustration and uncertainty.

### **A district-level administrator in a district that struggled with the standards transition diagnosed the problem in a way that highlights the need for coherence and ownership to reinforce each other in a district improvement strategy:**

“The priority has to be getting teachers to be thinkers themselves and getting them to reflect on their practice and working together to meet the needs (of students), no silos of excellence. All of our intentions are to do that but I think we do not...the things we roll out are intended to do that but the things we roll out are not comprehensive enough. They are little isolated practices, not extended over enough time for teachers to experience that reflection, that real opportunity. I feel like we have almost trained our teachers to not be thinkers because of the rate and the pace that we change initiatives. So they have that this too shall pass mindset and that is not the mindset of a thinker. We have created that mindset and that is what has to change first.”



## Asset 3: Quality In-House Professional Development

### What is it?

**A professional learning system that promotes the development and use of home-grown expertise. Professional learning is closely connected to daily practice, often takes place in context, and is part of a continuous cycle of learning, application, reflection, and revision.**

In our most recent national survey, just 44% of teachers responded that the professional development provided by their school and/or district was “Valuable” or “Extremely Valuable” for their classroom practice. This is consistent with the large body of both opinion and impact research calling the value of much professional development into question. In two of our study districts, much higher numbers of teachers (72%) found the locally-provided PD they experienced to be valuable. What made the difference?

We would argue that is no coincidence that the two districts whose PD value far exceeded national levels were the same two districts where teachers and administrators agreed that there were clear literacy priorities and could articulate them succinctly. Those coherent priorities guided both the selection of what PD teachers experienced and, crucially, expectations for how new professional learning was to be implemented. Seeing those high-level connections and understanding how professional learning applied to immediate classroom decisions increased the probability that the learning would be transferred.

**The likelihood that professional learning would be transferred to classroom practice was further increased by three common design features:**

1. Teachers had time within the PD session itself to work with colleagues to make a specific plan for implementation.
2. Expectations for implementation were often made concrete with “homework”- participants being expected to bring back classroom artifacts to the next PD session and be ready to discuss how learning worked in practice.
3. Teachers and administrators often learned together, so they were exposed to the same information and developed a shared understanding of the practices being supported.

All of the case study districts promoted opportunities for teachers to develop and lead professional learning for peers. This is a best practice not only because leading PD builds the human capital of the presenters, but because teachers are more likely to see strategies as credible and realistic when presented by someone teaching in the same district, working with comparable student populations. Although all four case study districts to some extent encouraged the use of in-house PD leaders as opposed to external consultants, only the two high-coherence districts had PD that was highly valued by teachers. Our research suggests that this is because the high coherence districts provided more focused learning options that were seen as having immediate utility to daily practice. By contrast, PD in the low-coherence districts, although often led by expert peers and presenting ideas that intrigued participants, was less often acted upon. Presenters offered sessions of their own devising, and teachers picked from a broad menu of topics. The result was that over the course of the year, teachers attended a random assortment of sessions with no connections and no follow-up. Teachers on the same grade level or subject area team, unless they deliberately coordinated, might be developing very different approaches.

**A teacher in a high-autonomy, low-coherence district noted that “A few mandatory days could be better used if they went more in depth with a literacy topic as opposed to a number of short sessions. And there is not a lot of vetting on those sessions. Is that really best practice? Yeah you had fun with that in your class but is that the best way to do it?”**

While it is important for teachers to have agency in selecting their professional learning, this research suggests that unrestrained choice by individual teachers is effective in developing neither individual human nor shared social capital. The development of human capital is limited by brief exposure to isolated strategies, which fails to support the application and reflection needed for deeper learning. The development of social capital is inhibited by the lack of reinforcement from peers working towards a shared goal.



## Asset 4: Time Invested in Teacher Collaborative Work

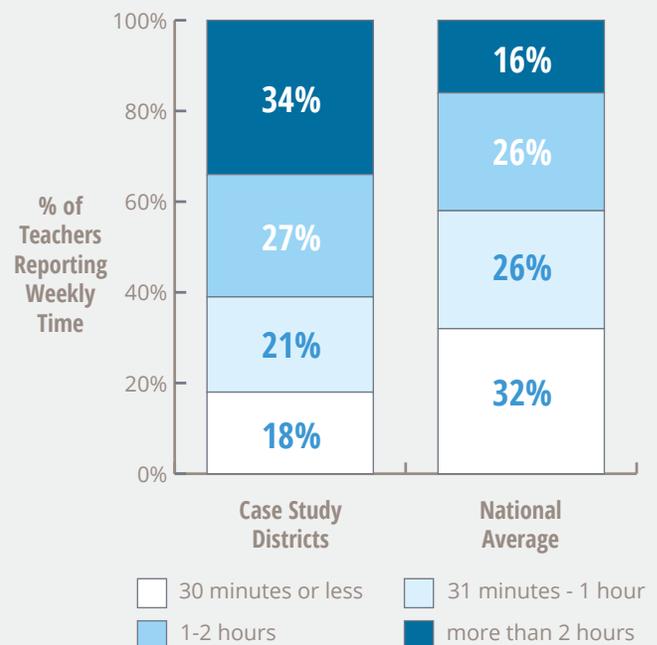
### What is it?

**Regular time (at least weekly), vigilantly protected from interruptions, for teams of teachers to engage in core professional work such as planning and reflecting on instruction, making curricular decisions, and analyzing student data or work. Because the time is consistently provided and demonstrably valued by school leaders, it becomes an essential element of how educators do their job.**

In each of our national surveys from 2012-2015, teachers rated collaborative time with other educators as by far the form of professional learning that had the most impact on their practices. Those surveys also confirmed what most educators already know- teaching in the U.S. is a highly isolated profession. Compared to their peers in other developed nations, U.S. teachers spend significantly more time instructing students and significantly less time honing their craft with their peers.<sup>iii</sup> Time is a precious resource in schools, but all four of our case study districts made a strategic choice to invest in routine collaborative work time for teachers. In our most recent national survey, just 16% of teachers reported having more than two hours per week to work with colleagues; the average across our case study districts was more than double that, at 34%.

How did they find the time? The secret seems to lie less in clever manipulation of schedules than in norms and expectations. Schedules matter of course, and these districts carved out routine time for team collaboration through late starts, early dismissals, and strategic deployment of specialist teachers. What seemed to matter most, though, were norms around the protection and use of scheduled collaboration time. In our national survey, just 39% of teachers agreed that “The time of teacher teams to work together on literacy is protected from scheduling intrusions and other tasks.” Among our case study districts between 50 and 80% of teachers said that was true. In our interviews we heard words like “sacrosanct” and “cherished” applied to collaboration time.

### Weekly Collaborative Work Time for Teachers



**Culturally, the key shift, which leaders emphasized took time and consistency to accomplish, was from talking about “my planning time” to “our planning time.”**

The shift towards collective ownership of planning time was reinforced by clear expectations of what collaborative time is for: carrying out joint professional tasks. Leaders emphasized that if PLC time is built into a schedule without clear expectations for joint work, the time may not be used well, or at all. Teachers, for their part, told us that once the norm was well established, “you realize how much more efficient you are doing those things as a team, and it becomes harder not to do it.” As a critical mass of teachers comes to value the collective time, they become its fiercest defenders, pushing back against collaboration time being bumped for other meetings or activities because “that is when we do our work.”



## Asset 5: Frequency of Powerful Collaborative Tasks

### What is it?

Collaborative time is not only consistently provided, but used effectively on tasks that support the close examination and continuous improvement of teaching and learning. Collaboration time and classroom time are woven together in a cycle of co-creation of lessons and assessments, reflection on the resulting student learning, and development of instructional implications.

**Our national surveys consistently find strong correlations between routine collaboration, high levels of teacher trust, and the quick spread of best practices. Such correlations represent the self-reinforcing “virtuous cycle” of collective capacity development:**



When we look inside the black box of collaboration to find out how teams actually spend their collaboration time, we find that certain collaborative tasks are more strongly linked to successful shifts in literacy practice:

- Co-creating curriculum
- Co-creating assessments
- Analyzing student data
- Examining student work

These, of course, are the core tasks of the instructional cycle: designing lessons, deciding how to assess whether students have met objectives, examining resulting student work, then determining implications for the next instructional cycle. Our research suggests that when teachers do these things together regularly, they are more effective than when they do them in isolation. As a teacher put it, collaborative team time is “the most productive minutes of my week- everything I can get done in that room, 45 minutes there is equivalent to 4 hours on my own. I am better when I have ideas to bounce off. Build something more meaningful when we work together and the fat gets cut away.”

This seems obvious, but many teachers do not have the opportunity to work this way. First, as discussed above, many U.S. teachers have little to no routine time to work together. Second, even when they do, that time is not always used to do core instructional work. All four of our case study districts were well above the national average not only in how much collaboration time they provided for teachers, but in how effectively teachers used that time.

Specifically, teachers in these districts reported higher frequency of co-creating lessons and assessments and collaboratively examining resulting student data and work. As a result, collaboration time served as an engine for the generation of collective capacity.

We identified several factors that supported the effective use of collaboration time in our case study districts.

- A. Building leaders played an active role with collaborative teams, maintaining a balance of accountability and support.
- B. Coaches worked with teams as well as individuals, a strategy which appeared to have a multiplier effect on coaching. (See Asset #8 below for more details on coaching for coherence and capacity-building.)
- C. Districts invested in explicit training on effective collaboration.
- D. Districts created or adapted tools that reinforced the training and made it concrete, including agenda structures, templates for analyzing student work, and online repositories for collaborative products.
- E. To function most effectively, the tools had to be supported by a norm of transparency. Not only team members but coaches, principals, and sometimes other teachers had access to collaborative products, allowing them to ask questions and make suggestions. Making collaboration to some degree public creates accountability for using the time well.



## Asset 6: Formative Data Use

### What is it?

**Collaborative analysis of student data is a routine part of the instructional cycle. Data is defined broadly to encompass many forms of evidence of student learning, including not only standardized assessments but teacher-developed assessments and student work products. The emphasis is on short-cycle use for the development of immediate instructional implications.**

In high capacity districts, data use is deeply entwined with collaboration. Rather than being a once-a-quarter exercise, many teachers in these districts were analyzing data far more frequently, as part of their weekly collaboration and planning with grade level or subject area colleagues. Places where data work was considered most useful by teachers had the following characteristics in common:

- “Data” was widely understood to include many forms of evidence of student learning, not just standardized tests;
- Teachers were provided with training, protocols, and active coaching support to make meaning from data;
- Data were owned and often generated by the team, from assessments or other student tasks they developed themselves;
- Data were embedded in the instructional cycle, the organic product of classroom activities, not an external judgment of their efficacy;

For teachers in many districts, “analyzing student data” means gathering for quarterly examinations of the results of formal benchmark tests. Such data comes from outside of the routine instructional cycle, often with a strong flavor of accountability and judgment. Usually, moreover, teachers view it as being too broad and/or too late to be of much use instructionally. The most common complaint that teachers have about standardized assessment data is that it may help diagnose problems but is of little use in developing solutions.

Teachers in our case study districts of course worked with benchmark and other standardized test data, but it was far from the only kind of data that fed their collaborative conversations. The broad definition of data and its routine use as part of the instructional cycle allowed data work in these districts to transcend diagnosis and generate useful instructional implications.





## Asset 7: Capacity-Driven Leadership at the Building Level

### What is it?

**Capacity-driven school leaders invest in and protect time for teacher collaboration and model collaboration in their own leadership and decision-making. They frequently engage in learning and collaboration with teachers, offering their expertise and support while respecting teacher expertise and ownership of their work. They provide clear expectations and the resources to meet them, leading through motivation and opportunities, not mandates and accountability.**

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Teachers in all of our study districts were significantly more likely than the national average to agree to the following statements about literacy efforts at their school, all of which indicate a leadership style that balances coherent direction with collective ownership:

- School leaders engage in professional learning about literacy alongside teachers.
- (School level) literacy priorities were developed collaboratively with teachers.
- Decisions about literacy curriculum and instruction draw on the expertise of teachers.
- Teachers have influence over decisions about their own professional learning.

The prevalence of administrators engaging in co-learning with teachers was striking in high capacity districts. Beyond providing formal PD sessions and time for routine collaboration, administrators were frequently at the table with teachers, immersed in the specifics of new instructional practices. When teachers talked about how this worked, they emphasized the importance of trust as a necessary precursor- teachers had to trust that the administrator was there as a fellow educator, engaged in learning, not evaluation. Administrators described earning that trust by showing up at the table week after week, being useful without dominating. Because time is the most precious commodity in schools, the currency of school improvement, teachers took note of administrators demonstrating their commitment to collaborative learning and planning by making it a consistent priority. Teachers also noticed and valued that administrators did their homework before meetings- they knew what was going on and did not expect teams to spend precious time bringing them up to date. Finally, the most successful co-learning happened when administrators succeeded in switching seamlessly between their “principal hat” and their “educator hat.” Teachers valued having the principal as an informed colleague in discussions of instructional practice, offering suggestions and perspectives, not dictates. At the same time, having the principal at the table was helpful to get quick answers to how ideas under discussion would meld with district expectations or fit within calendars and schedules.

For administrators, the great benefit of being present at the collaboration table (in person when possible, through transparently shared documents when not) was being able to connect new professional learning and teacher planning with the execution of those ideas during classroom observations. In this way, feedback was seen more as part of the ongoing dialogue among colleagues, grounded in shared ideas about best practice as opposed to dictated by an abstract rubric that might or might not speak to that week’s most pressing instructional issues.

Obviously, principals cannot be in more than one place at a time, and supporting professional learning is not their only responsibility. The principals we spoke with in high capacity districts described how they differentiated their support for teams, establishing a presence early on with teams that had new members or potentially difficult dynamics. Their goal, however, was to build the capacity of each team to function effectively whether or not the administrator was present, then step back.



## Asset 8: Implementation Support through Coaching

### What is it?

**Coaching that builds not just individual but collective capacity attends to the coherence of instructional approaches in a school and district. Capacity-building coaching focuses on assets, not deficits, and is carefully separated from evaluation and accountability systems. By proactively promoting two-way communication across multiple levels in an instructional system (district-teacher, principal-teacher, teacher-teacher), coaches help to build and connect nodes of capacity, accelerating the spread of best practices across the network.**

Coaching is widely accepted as a powerful strategy for building the human capital of individual teachers, but using it to build shared social capital in schools is trickier. In fact, we saw evidence in this study that two commonly used coaching approaches, while building the skills of the teachers receiving coaching, may actually undermine collective capacity. When coaching is focused purely on the development needs of individual teachers, without reference to the district's overall literacy vision, it can lead to fragmentation rather than building coherence.

The first way in which coaching can inadvertently undermine social capital is by taking a deficit approach. Coaches are assigned to work with teachers who are seen to need "fixing" and may or may not be interested in receiving coaching. In this scenario working with a coach may acquire stigma, and the teacher being coached is put in a defensive position. This situation is unlikely to allow for the openness to questioning and experimentation needed for deep learning. Depending on the degree of teacher buy-in and cooperation, such a coaching relationship may lead to growth in the individual teacher's skills, but even in this best case, that learning is unlikely to spread to other teachers.

The second coaching model that can undermine coherence is nearly the reverse of the deficit model. In this approach teachers opt in to working with coaches, putting in place the intrinsic motivation that makes growth more likely. So far, so good. If, however, not only participation but the actual content of the coaching work is purely at the individual teacher's discretion, the result is likely to be fragmentation. One of our case study districts had such a model in place. Teachers could request to work with a coach and set whatever development goal they chose. It might be an instructional strategy they heard about at a professional conference or read about in a journal; it might be implementing a new piece of technology. Not only was there no connection to school or district goals, coaches were explicitly directed not to communicate with building leaders about the work they were doing with teachers in the building. While this norm of confidentiality very clearly separated coaching from evaluation and created a high degree of trust and safety, the complete privatization of the learning occurring took attention away from shared goals.

How can districts avoid these problems and develop a coaching program that builds not only human but social capital? One of our case study districts seemed to have found the balance. Their coaching program included the following design features:

- Teachers opt-in, making a commitment to growth;
- Coaching focuses on building from strengths- taking something a teacher is already doing well from good to great;
- Teachers select from a limited number of "signature practices" to go deep on, all of which are coherent with the district's overall instructional vision;
- Rather than establishing a norm of strict privacy in the coaching relationship, coaches are two-way communicators, allowing them to answer questions about district initiatives and simultaneously relay teacher feedback.
- Reach of coaches is multiplied by allowing them to work with teams as well as individuals. Coaching is an expensive investment. Rather than limiting the capacity building to individuals, coaches often sit in on team planning sessions.  
**By positioning themselves as resources to collaborative teams, coaches accelerate the spread of effective practices within the structure of teachers' day to day work.**
- The system invests in building the capacity of the coaches themselves, through intensive training in coaching techniques and regular time for coaches to problem-solve together. This pays off whether coaches return to full time classroom teaching, or, as is often the case, move into other teacher leadership or administrative positions.



## Asset 9: Strong Collaborative Culture

### What is it?

**Strong collaborative cultures are characterized by high degrees of trust among teachers and between teachers and administrators. Trust manifests itself in an open door approach to sharing instructional plans and practice and willingness to ask questions, admit uncertainty, and seek feedback. Educators speak in the plural not the singular about “our work” and “our students.”**

Strong norms of professional collaboration and de-privatized practice are powerful predictors of effective schools in our research and that of others. All of our case study districts invested in time for teacher collaboration at levels above the national average, and all of them described some variation of the journey from having collaboration structures in place to having a truly collaborative culture. The evolution looks something like this:



We have already seen that these districts invested in collaboration time (Asset #4) and consciously supported its effective use (Asset #5). As co-creation becomes a routine part of how educators do their jobs, and members come to rely on each other and become more interdependent, teams start to build up a truly collaborative culture. LOCI's research on effective collaboration, including interviews with high functioning teams across the case study districts, suggests that the best marker of a truly collaborative culture is the balance between trust and challenge. Team culture must make members feel safe in asking questions, admitting uncertainty, even exposing mistakes as learning opportunities. At the same time, members must be willing to challenge each other and engage in hard conversations about what is working for students, and what is not. Collaborative culture emphatically does not mean teams just being nice to each other or keeping each other comfortable.

### **In powerful professional collaboration, team members owe loyalty not just to each other but to their shared agreements about effective instruction.**

For many of the teams we talked to, moving from co-creating lessons and assessments to collaboratively examining the student work resulting from those lessons and assessments was a turning point. While bringing in classroom artifacts often left teachers feeling uncomfortable and exposed at first, it took their conversations about instruction to a deeper level. Some of the teams we talked to described going through a stage where members only wanted to share the best student work with colleagues, as proof of the excellence of their teaching. Most eventually realized that they had much more to learn by looking at the work of students who had not fully mastered the material and using that to develop instructional next steps.

Keeping the balance of trust and challenge is an ongoing, delicate dance. Although many of the teams we interviewed had gone through an upfront process of formally setting norms, they emphasized that it was only when those norms were tested by working through difficult situations that they came fully alive.



## Asset 10: Teacher Leadership

### What is it?

Capacity-driven systems provide both formal and informal opportunities for teachers to act as leaders in their domain of expertise: curriculum, instruction and assessment. Teacher involvement in decisions about their core work goes beyond representation or voice. The system is open to teachers defining and enacting new leadership roles which allow expertise to be spread.

All of our case study districts saw cultivating teacher leadership as a key capacity-building strategy. Although the roles that teacher leaders played in the districts ranged widely, the districts seem to have gone through a similar evolution in their thinking about how to use teacher leaders:

**LEVEL 1** Conveying information

**LEVEL 2** Providing representation

**LEVEL 3** Supporting implementation

At the most basic or traditional level, teachers are used for one-way communication, attending district-wide sessions primarily to listen to information about initiatives and convey that back to their school-level peers. At the second level, communication becomes two-way, as teacher representatives not only relay district approaches to their schools, but feed teacher responses and experiences back into the district-level decision making processes. In our case study districts, we saw curriculum mapping processes operating at this level. We also saw some examples of teachers moving beyond a communications or representation role to active provision of support for fellow teachers in district initiatives. For example:

- In one district teachers could apply to serve on ad hoc “Product Development Teams” and be paid a stipend for the completion of a specific product such as a new early literacy assessment framework. Interestingly, the PDTs sprung out of a more traditional vertical committee in which representatives from each grade level would meet quarterly by content area to identify issues and propose solutions. The district learned through experience that the representative committee was a good mechanism for identifying needs but not always the right group to follow through on developing solutions. As a district leader explained, “the concept for the PDTs was reaching out to staff to see ‘who has care for this particular issue and wants to invest their time?’ vs. you get assigned to work on it just because you happen to be on the committee.” PDTs were an effective, flexible mechanism for channeling teacher expertise and passion towards the instructional issues they valued the most.
- A high school in another district was experimenting with replacing the traditional “department chair” role with “department instructional coach.” To better tap teacher expertise, the role was shifted from running meetings to actively supporting fellow teachers in instructional change. This challenged the norm that department leadership was a perquisite of the most senior teacher in each department, while giving the role more substantive responsibilities in instructional improvement.

**In these and other examples, the key was creating space for teachers to take ownership of issues that mattered to them, a far more powerful conception of leadership than being one step up on a hierarchical chain of rolling out orders.**

Across the districts, we saw examples of teachers acting as leaders through the active support of instructional improvement in the following ways:

- Designing and delivering PD
- Helping other teachers identify opportunities to implement PD in their classrooms
- Working with peers to review instructional artifacts to assess the effectiveness of new approaches
- Being trained in and then leading data analysis, with a particular focus on getting past diagnosing problems to identifying solutions (see Asset #6)

Although the specific forms of teacher leadership varied, we saw the two key commonalities in district strategy which allowed teacher leadership to emerge and thrive:

- Teacher leadership was not limited to formal roles with specific titles. Teachers were encouraged to bring forward ideas for improvement and then supported to run with them. Teacher leadership was not a formal program but a natural outgrowth of a capacity-driven approach, in which the expertise of teachers was channeled to benefit their peers and the system as a whole.
- Teacher leaders received various forms of training and support to play their roles. These districts understood that a teacher with great instructional expertise does not necessarily know how to play a leadership or coaching role with peers. (In fact, they may be reluctant to do so, fearing that it violates professional norms.) In some cases, such as leading data teams, the training was formal and structured. In other cases the support was more informal, such as a principal carving out time once a month for the leaders of all grade level teams to come together and debrief about what was and was not going well on their teams and problem-solve together about how to move their teams forward.



## Asset 11: Professional Accountability

### What is it?

**Professional accountability emerges from a shared commitment to practices that are most effective for students. Rather than being accountable to rules or procedures, teachers are accountable to each other for following through on their collective decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. They are accountable not just for implementing practices but for measuring their impact, learning from them, and modifying what doesn't work for students.**

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Say the word “accountability” to most educators, and what springs to mind is usually standardized tests. The focus on testing and the rewards and punishments associated with it embedded in recent rounds of federal policy has made accountability almost a dirty word within the profession. But test-driven accountability is only part of the picture, and not the part most likely to drive improvement. In his work on the “wrong drivers” of improvement, Michael Fullan summarizes the evidence and the logic of why strategies starting with external accountability are unlikely to yield broad and lasting improvements in learning. By contrast, in his work on “Professional Capital as Accountability” he documents the power of accountability that is defined as “a collective commitment and responsibility to improve student learning and strengthen the teaching profession. (2015, p.4).”<sup>iv</sup>

Two of our case study districts, the two who had committed to capacity-building strategies over long periods of time and consistently across the district, showed evidence of a different, much more powerful form of accountability: the internal accountability of members of a profession accountable to each other for doing what is best for student learning. In these districts, teachers were starting to talk about accountability differently, as shared responsibility, even as a moral imperative. It showed up in expectations among teams that agreed upon practices would be not only implemented but evaluated for their impact.

**As a teacher put it “Accountability is not the principal pulling up data and pointing fingers. It is about are we all trying the things we are learning. Are we actually using the unit planner or is it a piece of paper? Are we all trying the strategies?”**

The ownership that teachers had developed for district literacy approaches translated to responsibility for implementing them and learning from them. Rather than following orders, they were acting in ways consistent with their best professional judgment. For teachers in these systems, the most powerful shift was in the role they were expected to play vis-à-vis curriculum, not implementing what was handed to them but using their expertise to determine how to meet shared goals. As a teacher reflected,

*“Without that ‘open the book do this say this’ we really had to find what worked. Really got to think through why we were doing something, your own idea of what is good quality, what does it mean to meet that standard—To sit with a group of strongly opinionated people and talk about what sources we use, that is an engaging and difficult process—it does hold you accountable to ‘What am I asking the kids to do and is my entire unit aligned with the assessment at the end?’ The trick there is getting everyone involved in building it. If you do not build it yourself you are not as invested in the outcomes.”*

Professional accountability is the last of the district capacity assets examined for an important reason: these case studies confirmed Fullan’s contention that true accountability is not something you lead with in reform but something that emerges from the shared work.<sup>v</sup> Whereas the other assets discussed to greater or lesser extents can be deliberately cultivated, professional accountability is the by-product of a system committed to capacity building.

## Appendix A: About the Case Study Districts

In the table below we describe the context and demographics of the four districts, along with the capacity-building professional learning approaches identified in the selection process.

	Location	Students	% FRL	% minority	Capacity Building Practices
<b>District A</b>	Suburban/ Rural	10,000	50%	45%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10+ years using network of site based literacy leadership teams to design and deliver PD.</li> <li>• Monthly literacy learning walks used to identify PD needs and look for evidence of implementation.</li> <li>• Used federal grant to add more job-embedded support for integration of literacy across the curriculum.</li> </ul>
<b>District B</b>	Suburban/ Small City	25,000	40%	70%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused standards transition on mastering “signature practices”</li> <li>• Internalizing and scaling the coaching model introduced by an external partner.</li> <li>• Coaching and PLCs used to provide support for classroom transfer of professional learning.</li> </ul>
<b>District C</b>	Rural/ Small City	15,000	25%	30%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers participate in product development teams to fill needs identified in walkthroughs.</li> <li>• Significant amount of PD developed and selected by teachers</li> <li>• Coaching model to address goals in individual teacher PD plans.</li> </ul>
<b>District D</b>	Urban/ Rural	65,000	44%	50%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Federal grant used to provide follow up coaching support for PD.</li> <li>• Tools and templates to structure reflective practice.</li> <li>• Teacher leadership in development and piloting of standards-based curriculum.</li> </ul>

## Appendix B: LOCI District Capacity Factors Self-Assessment Tool

Using this Tool: This tool presents 11 factors shown in LOCI research to help districts build the capacity for sustainable instructional improvement. Each factor is shown along a spectrum, from practices which clearly build capacity to factors which clearly work against it. For each factor, mark where you think your district falls on the spectrum. This chart is designed to be used as part of collaborative self-assessment. The column on the left (red) indicates the characteristics of a system that needs to “stop” and engage in systematic planning for needed action. The column on the far right (green) indicates not necessarily that everything is perfect but rather there are strong routines and norms already in place to continue moving forward without any external support. We have found that this four column self-assessment rubric rubrics well to allow consensus to easily develop with an internal review team about where their school fits. Essentially the question asked is “are we more like a red or more like a green. Based upon our gut level reaction and then supported by evidence that we all call out, are we more like a system that needs to stop and pay some serious attention to this issue OR are we developing strong internal norms and routines for this work to move along?” When we work with systems we often put up a long strip of chart paper with the column headings marked and then ask individuals of a team to use sticky notes to go around and place where their system fits on each category and provide at least one piece of evidence to support. The conversation around becomes part of planning for next steps and developing internal agreement about the conditions of the systems. This can be done in as little as 20 minutes or with further discussion as long as 60. It works equally well with teachers and instructional leaders.

### Steps as a basis for group reflection:

- Have each participant make the ratings individually
- Draw each factor as a five-point scale on chart paper.
- Have each individual mark their rating.
- For factors where ratings cluster towards the high end, ask participants to name specific structures or practices contributing to that strength.
- For factors where ratings cluster towards the low end, ask participants to name opportunities for improvement.
- For factors where ratings are scattered, have participants discuss the rationale for their ratings.

		Does Not Build Capacity			Builds Capacity
1	 <i>Coherent vision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No clear vision of effective instruction</li> <li>• Vision too abstract, not clearly connected to classroom practice</li> <li>• Initiative overload</li> <li>• Short timeline for success</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stick with structures and processes long enough to let them work</li> <li>• Learn and adapt within a clear framework</li> </ul>
2	 <i>Balance of coherence and ownership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site-level and classroom autonomy untethered from a shared goal</li> <li>• Vision mandated from top down, monitored for fidelity of implementation</li> <li>• Vision based on packaged approach or purchased curriculum</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers are involved in developing and shaping goals</li> <li>• Innovating towards a common goal</li> </ul>
3	 <i>In-house PD</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One shot events on multiple topics</li> <li>• Reliance on external trainers</li> <li>• Focus on transmission of knowledge</li> <li>• Focus on learning to use specific strategies or products</li> <li>• Lecture-style pedagogy</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cycle of learning focused on one topic</li> <li>• Led by internal experts</li> <li>• Focus on application in context</li> <li>• Grounded in consistent vision of effective pedagogy</li> <li>• Includes time to collaborate with peers</li> <li>• Models targeted pedagogy</li> </ul>

		Does Not Build Capacity			Builds Capacity
4	 <i>Time for collaboration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation is optional</li> <li>• Time is pre-empted</li> <li>• Time is unstructured</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone participates, on the clock</li> <li>• Time is respected</li> <li>• Agendas and routines to use time well</li> </ul>
5	 <i>Collaborative tasks</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited to planning at the outline level</li> <li>• No continuity of learning from week to week</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tightly connected to daily instructional practice</li> <li>• Co-creation of lessons and assessments is frequent</li> <li>• Reflection grounded in examination of student work</li> <li>• Looks forward and back- how can we teach this? How did they learn it?</li> </ul>
6	 <i>Data work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on summative assessments</li> <li>• Limited to problem identification</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent and formative</li> <li>• Gets to problem solving and instructional implications</li> <li>• Teams generate/ own data</li> </ul>
7	 <i>Capacity-driven building leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders pre-empt collaboration time with other work</li> <li>• Leader dictates team agendas</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders learn with teacher teams</li> <li>• Leaders protect time for collaboration</li> <li>• Leaders demonstrate commitment to collaboration through consistent participation</li> </ul>
8	 <i>Implementation support through coaching</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fragmented, on-demand</li> <li>• Deficit model</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on shared vision</li> <li>• Support for effective implementation of PD</li> </ul>
9	 <i>Strong collaborative culture</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private practice</li> <li>• Safety trumps other norms</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balance of trust and challenge</li> <li>• Transparency</li> </ul>
10	 <i>Teacher leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal and informal roles</li> <li>• Investment in developing leadership skills</li> <li>• Focused on leadership among colleagues</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited to “input”</li> <li>• Focused on external networks</li> </ul>
11	 <i>Accountability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defined by compliance</li> <li>• Functions through monitoring, rewards, and sanctions</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defined by professionalism</li> <li>• Functions through shared responsibility</li> </ul>

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>Most prominently and starkly, *The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth about Teacher Development* (2015, TNTP) challenges the very assumption that “we know how to help teachers get better.” Based on examining the relationship between teacher professional development investments and changes in teacher evaluation ratings and value-added scores, the report concludes that “no type, amount, or combination of development activities appears more likely than any other to help teachers improve substantially, including the ‘job-embedded,’ ‘differentiated’ variety that we and many others believe to be most promising.” The Gates Foundation’s *Teachers Know Best: Teachers’ Views on Professional Development* found that “large majorities of teachers do not believe that professional development is helping them prepare for the changing nature of their jobs.” And New America Foundation’s *No Panacea: Diagnosing What Ails Teacher Development Before Reaching for Remedies* summarizes: “Despite PD investments by federal, state, and local agencies totaling about \$18 billion a year (not counting the cost of the time spent by the nation’s 3.1 million teachers, little evidence exists to demonstrate that these investments have been consistently effective in improving teacher practice or student learning outcomes.”

<sup>ii</sup>Nelson, C.A. *Building Literacy Capacity: The Conditions for Effective Standards Implementation* (2015).

Nelson, C.A. *Remodeling Literacy Learning Together: Paths to Standards Implementation* (2014)

Nelson, C.A. *Remodeling Literacy Learning: Making Room for What Works*. (2013)

<sup>iii</sup>National Staff Development Council (2009). *Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad*. Dallas, TX: Linda Darling-Hammond, Ruth Chung Wei, Aletha Andree, Nikole Richardson, and Stelios Orphanos.

McKinsey and Co. *How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*. November, 2010.

<sup>iv</sup>Fullan, M. (2011). *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform*. Center for Strategic Education: Victoria, Australia.

<sup>v</sup>Fullan, M., Rincon-Gallardo, S., & Hargreaves, A. (2015). Professional capital as accountability. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 23(15). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v23.1998>.

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**We don't just want to do good work. We want to do impactful work. Our job as partners is to guide and support leaders and teachers on a path that builds on local aspects when designing learning systems that leverages collective capacity for change and improved outcomes for students.**

-Dr. KaiLonnie Dunsmore, LOCI founder and principal research scientist at NORC at The University of Chicago



NORC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**Partnering with schools and districts to build internal capacity for growth in literacy teaching and learning**

## **Get in Touch**

**We'd love to explore how LOCI can help your organization realize ongoing change.**

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