The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) contracted with the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) to design and conduct a program evaluation of the School Redesign Grant (SRG) program, from January 2012 through September 2014. The purposes of the evaluation are:

- to provide ESE with the type of formative feedback that would support continuous improvement in school, district, and ESE implementation of SRG, and

- to capture evidence of short- and (eventually) long-term changes, developing explanations of changes (progress, success) that are likely associated with elements of SRG.

This memo is designed to provide ESE with an overview of emerging evaluation findings, and to inform the ongoing development and management of the SRG initiative.

This memo in context: The first goal of this memo is to apprise ESE of the results of the district leader interviews that UMDI conducted from November 2012 through January 2013. A total of 18 telephone interviews were conducted with leaders from nine districts; the number of interviewees ranged from one to three for each district.[1] These interviews yielded thoughtful reflections on district engagement in redesign processes, and as this memo represents our first formal communication regarding the interviews, we devote much of the text that follows to a discussion of findings from these conversations. At the same time, however, it should be noted that UMDI's analysis plan represents the gradual building of understanding from multiple data collection strategies employed throughout the course of the evaluation. The strength of this approach is that it situates us to compare and contrast findings over time and across respondents (e.g., comparing the district perspectives from last year to this year, examining principals' perspective in relation to district perspectives, etc.), and our explanations become stronger and more layered as a result. So while this memo prioritizes the new material (district interviews) and accordingly reflects a particular orientation toward district-level engagement in redesign, a second goal of the memo is to explore common themes that emerge from previous interviews, site visits, and surveys. As we move through the spring, data will be collected through multiple strategies, including new site visits, another administration of the principals' survey, and a new instrument—the educators' survey. Accordingly, findings from those activities will continue to inform our analytical work and responses to the research questions. UMDI will continue to apprise ESE of ongoing analysis through telephone and email conversations, as well as an Overview of Emergent Findings memo (May 31) and a Synthesis Brief (June 30).

The bulk of the memo is devoted to discussion of the overarching finding from this recent round of interviews. Brief subsequent sections address findings in discrete areas: School-level Changes Associated with SRG, [2] Challenges to Implementing Redesign, Reflections on Sustainability, and Feedback to ESE.

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[1] Brockton has been exempted from FY13 evaluation activities, and Lawrence was exempted from this round of interviews.

[2] A note on attribution: SRG is structured as a complex set of tools (e.g., funds, processes, mechanisms) to be used by educators in conjunction with other tools. SRG does not follow a more traditional project design that would be represented in a logic model as a linear progression of factors, such as problem identification, inputs, outputs, results and impacts. Rather, components of the grant are selected (as in the case of the four federal models) and applied by educators in their respective settings to problems that they deem salient. Typically, SRG funds are used in conjunction with other funds, and processes introduced by SRG overlap with other processes in effect in schools and districts. In this regard, some interviewees noted their inability to pinpoint changes that are solely the result of SRG. Accordingly, the evaluation does not attempt to ascribe causality in traditional, linear terms; instead, explanations of perceived effects of SRG take into account the multiple factors (e.g., policy developments, complementary initiatives) that are likely associated with change. Instances in which interviewees linked a particular effect to SRG are noted in the text; otherwise, changes are explored in relation to other processes and/or interventions.

Overarching finding: District-level engagement in redesign work reflects strengthened capacity, increasingly integrated efforts, and increasingly strategic approaches to managing reform.

In contrast to previous evaluation findings, which suggested that districts' capacity to provide coordinated, systematized, effective support to redesign schools was underdeveloped, the recent round of interviews revealed promising changes that reflect notable improvements. In particular, last year's feedback from principals (and interviews with district leaders) articulated the message that district support tends to hinge on the work of passionate and engaged—yet isolated—individuals. Some principals reported that incoherence resulted from the lack of a systemic (versus more individualized) approach to redesign. One principal commented:

> The district must become more supportive of turnaround leaders. Currently, there is a level of incoherence, where the team in place to support turnaround work is planning their support in isolation of the turnaround school teams. This must be aligned. Separate from the turnaround leadership team, there are many, many folks supportive of the work. This must, however, become a district-wide focus *and not the priority of individuals* [emphasis added]. (Cited in UMDI *Statewide Report*, 2012, p. 19)

Other principals noted that their district's underdeveloped capacity to support redesign was evidenced by a lack of coordination between various components of the district system: citing, for example, inconsistencies between learning walk protocols and indicators, and misalignments between teachers' professional development needs and actual professional development offerings. Additional examples of principals' suggestions for revised district approaches included calls for the district to understand each school's particular context and to grant the principal sufficient autonomy to make decisions—especially budgeting and hiring decisions—guided by knowledge of their school's realities.

This section presents key findings related to districts' strengthened capacity, increased integration, and strategic approaches to managing reform.

> ➤ **Self-reflective processes: Some districts optimized the potential to apply school-level learnings gleaned through SRG to their own work at the district level.**

Last year's evaluation suggested that while SRG guided *schools* through a process of comprehensive self-examination and reflection, parallel processes had not yet been introduced at the *district* level. The recent round of interviews offer evidence that such processes were in fact, integral to some districts' redesign experience (if somewhat elusive when contrasted with more formalized processes and tools, such as Monitoring Site Visits, MAGs, and redesign applications, that focused more heavily on school-based reform).[3] Some districts—especially those in their second or third year of redesign—do appear to be reflecting and changing in important ways, alongside their schools. Further, evidence suggests that districts' engagement in redesign may, in some cases, only now be starting to bear fruit.[4]

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[3] This statement does not ignore the district-specific elements of SRG tools and processes; the point is rather that the initiative prioritized school-based change, especially in its initial years, and shifted to augment monitoring of, and support to, districts in Year 2 and beyond.

[4] In the discussion that follows, district leaders' reflections on district-level change are illustrated with specific examples, to the extent possible. The evaluation plan—which includes strategies such as triangulation of sources and methods, and iterative data collection and analysis phases —allows that these emerging findings will be subject to continued investigation. They may be revised, negated, or more fully elaborated over time.

In retrospect, it appears to some educators and leaders that SRG was a good teaching and learning experience, as it gave districts the chance to reflect on their work: first, at the school level, through stakeholder meetings and required start-up conversations, then through the lens of Monitoring Site Visits, and later through re-application materials and continued exchanges with ESE. In contrast to prior reforms—more prescriptive, more characterized by discrete interventions—SRG gave educators the time and tools to examine and adjust their own philosophies and practices. For example, one district leader characterized the SRG experience as follows: "SRG allowed us to experiment." The leader described a process wherein the district identified "what worked" at the school level, and then applied that learning to the district:

> What SRG allowed was the opportunity to try things at the school level, and then we thought about what's working at the school level and what would support from the district look like. …What worked was that we looked at [redesign] as a three-year process and so we asked what, foundationally, do we need in Year One? So Year One [we worked on] cultural and structural levels. … Year Two [we worked on] a coherent instructional theory of action.

Against this backdrop, the district's leadership team—comprised of at least seven senior leaders—used their meeting time to learn to work together, rather than as isolated individuals. One leader commented, "We grow as a team and figure out how to support this work twice a month." In this leader's view, the benefits of integrated efforts at the district level include not only increasingly effective responses, but also that this integrated approach sent a signal that redesign efforts would be institutionalized: "It helped people not think of this as just another initiative that's going to go away."

Similarly, in another district, leaders felt that the MSV protocol and process were so useful that they wanted to incorporate them into their ongoing, district-wide work. The district adapted the tool to their own needs, streamlined it, created a rubric, and is systematically implementing the revised tool for their instructional walkthroughs.

> ➤ **In some instances, SRG is credited with nurturing interdepartmental work, which contributes to enhanced district-level capacity.**

The district leader cited above took the initiative, not only to adapt the MSV, but also to train her colleagues in its use. She described an interdepartmental walkthrough training session that she had recently organized. The leader was surprised that senior-level representatives committed time to participate in the training, noting that good turnout rates were typically hard to achieve. She expressed her belief that SRG promoted and facilitated interdepartmental work more generally—that it was "an expectation of the grant," recalling collaborative efforts to improve instruction. She observed that this component of the SRG process could be made more explicit and/or more strongly emphasized. In part, she attributed the push toward interdepartmental work to ESE's District Standards and Indicators framework.

The value of such interdepartmental work was twofold, in the leader's perspective. First, the exercise contributed to a growing sense of "ownership of the work": by participating firsthand in the training experience, which included hands-on practice with the walkthrough tool and the giving and receiving of feedback among colleagues, participants recognized the importance—and complexity—of the task. Second, the training contributed to shared knowledge and skills across the departments. The leader commented, "This was good PD for us." Leaders from the research, assessment, and accountability offices now "know" the rubric in ways that they did not previously, and through their various regular work streams, they will ensure that walkthroughs will be conducted with ever-increasing skill and consistency.

> ➢ **In some instances, SRG is described as a sort of training ground: capacity was built through participation in redesign efforts.**

Some districts built capacity through the development of leadership internally. and then moved people into different, sometimes newly created, senior leadership positions. In some cases, the individuals had served in key roles in redesign efforts for a few years and that experience made them more ready to move up. These newly transitioned senior district leaders now bring their expertise to positions where they can influence the district as a whole.

A leader from a Cohort 1 district offered a similar perspective on the powerful learning potential inherent in the redesign experience. She described a recent work session for principals in which she realized that the principals' skills, especially with respect to reviewing and analyzing data, increased notably during the redesign experience. She cited a moment of realization: "We didn't know that they had gotten so good at this." She cited the value of longer-term participation in redesign, noting that the grant period allowed for professional growth, and that having invested in particular leadership teams in particular schools was proving to be beneficial. She explained that she has come to recognize the value of a collaborative, school-led process, such as the one the district employed during redesign, and understands the importance of building trust and ownership with schools. She noted that the district provided guidance and technical assistance along the way and that it was now "paying off."

> ➢ **Reflecting a refined examination of their ability to support turnaround schools, some districts are pursuing reorganizations, including the creation of new positions. In some districts, the emerging focus is now on recruiting and hiring for turnaround schools. These developments highlight changes in the strategies and structures that districts deploy to support schools.**

A few leaders described restructuring efforts currently underway: efforts designed to align their districts' resources with schools' needs, and to best utilize the expertise of district leaders. One leader described the shift as a move toward being more "school- and student-centered." Some districts are restructuring their support to schools so that individuals in various district departments are assigned to a small number of (redesign and other Level 4) schools and are tasked with providing direct support to them. In some cases, the departments meet with one another to look at data, identify resources, and collaborate to solve problems.

Another leader noted that capacity-building efforts in her district involved the creation of a Human Resources position and a renewed district-level focus on HR, with an eye toward retaining and recruiting the talent needed in particular schools. As one example of the value of this shift, the leader noted that the district would not have been able to implement the new educator evaluation system without the stronger HR department, and the agreements with the union that had been negotiated under redesign.

Yet another leader described a recent experience of having to hire for multiple principal vacancies, given a spate of retirements. The district decided that since the vacancies were in Level 3 schools—some on the cusp of Level 4 designation—they would take whatever steps were needed to ensure that these schools would receive the "robust leadership" they needed. So the district undertook expanded recruitment processes—multiple announcements, financial expenditures—in order to attract the expertise they sought. The leader explained:

> We didn't settle for the next in line. We wanted to find people with experience that aligned with the needs of that school to lead that school. [It meant] multiple announcements, lots of work, more money and recruiting, but we didn't shy away from that. It's a commitment we've made, and it's started to pay off. You need to start with that.

This leader explained that the more strategic hiring process resulted, in part, from having worked with ESE over the past year to think about supporting the Level 4 schools (including SRG schools). The district came to the realization that "Level 3s now need even greater attention," and hiring for new principals is one reflection of the lessons they learned.

> ➢ **Going beyond the Commonwealth's Framework for District Accountability and Assistance, some districts are taking a proactive approach to identifying schools at risk, and prioritizing resources for them.**

As suggested just above, some districts have developed their own systems for identifying schools at risk of declining performance. This is an important demonstration of district efforts to take a more proactive approach in identifying and addressing school needs, and to apply the lessons of turnaround (including SRG) in order to prevent further decline in L3 and other struggling schools. These districts demonstrate an increasing ability to identify and diagnose needs, to prioritize resources, and to coordinate internally.

One leader described the district's decision to be more "proactive" and "forward-thinking" by identifying a set of "high support" schools that have not received a state designation but that, based on student data, are at risk of such. These schools are now prioritized in terms of Central Office services and technical assistance. Recent district-level reorganization was implemented to ensure that specific people within specific district offices have responsibility for certain subgroups within this newly identified set of schools, thereby lessening the need for these schools to navigate Central Office bureaucracy. The leader noted, as well, that this expansion—from the set of state-designated turnaround schools (most are SRG schools) to the newly identified high support schools—pushed the district towards new thinking regarding the challenges associated with the district's distribution of support to all schools, while giving greater attention to high-need schools. One leader in this district categorized the challenge in the terms of both capacity and sustainability, taking into account the limited number of staff at the district level, as well as the finite resources available to support schools.

A leader from another district described a similar categorization system that they had recently developed. This district set goals for newly identified schools and put monitoring systems in place to support improvement from one level to the next. This leader cites the District Accountability and Assistance system as a catalyst for district-level changes, with respect to the district being able to categorize schools by level, prioritize needs, and align their resources. The leader reports that since the advent of the Accountability system, district personnel have been working more as a team to look at data, resources, the deployment of supports, and monitoring.

These districts' experiences contrast with accounts that some district and school leaders, as well as teachers, offered during last year's evaluation activities. Last year, the Level 4 designation was described by some as a shaming experience that had the net effect of making many good people feel bad. This year, some leaders, including one leader in a newly funded district, framed the experience as a catalyst for district changes.

> ➢ **Some districts have learned to focus their efforts and narrow their set of priorities, leading to improved alignment of resources and goal attainment.**

Mirroring comments heard during last year's round of interviews, some leaders noted that the schools purposefully chose to limit the scope of their efforts in each year of redesign—rather than working on 11 Essential Conditions or rolling out

multiple initiatives at once—because they noticed that focused efforts in a small number of areas were more effective. This is in contrast to a "fix it all at once" approach, and to the 25 initiatives one leader reported their Level 4 school had initially undertaken. Following suit, some districts are now developing district-wide, focused objectives and priorities. Adoption of a narrowly focused approach suggests that district and school leaders are recognizing the limits of a school's capacity to effect change in multiple areas, and are employing a strategic approach so that school resources are effectively employed to reach identified goals. One district leader acknowledged the complexities involved in managing and implementing multiple initiatives by emphasizing the continual need to practice and learn: "You can't just create alignment in Word."

> ➤ **In regard to strategic thinking about school supports, some districts have created specific mechanisms to support the principal as an instructional leader, including the establishment of school-based teams, targeted use of data, and embedded professional development to build principals' skills and knowledge. Increasingly differentiated supports to schools suggest that some districts are taking into account the role of context when thinking about implementing reforms.**

Some district leaders described evolving approaches to supporting schools, and their principals, in the context of turnaround. Some districts, for example, have a plan to put structures in place to support principals at every school, while others are assessing their data management systems so as to more effectively use data to identify and address schools' needs. In some instances, these developments suggest a changing relationship between the district and the school—one in which the district is seen as a resource for the school. Signaling the broader cultural shift that this could suggest, one leader described the district leadership team in these terms:

> We are a resource to principals. We try to take something off their plates so they can focus on instruction, [so they can] focus on their building. We do background work, when we can. Our interaction is very forthcoming. We have open conversations. We know each school has its own challenges, and we talk about that. That's the only way we can find common solutions … through direct communication. We are a critical friend. [So we ask], How can we use the resources that are in place to help you? If there's an issue we can coordinate, something we can fix, we do that. So, now it's easier for [principals] to ask for help, to say "I don't know that. I need support for that." The cultural change we want is that it's OK to ask for help. How do we move forward? It's not about pointing fingers.

This same district has also formalized the staffing structures in place at schools to support principals. The district has articulated a vision of a three-pronged support system for each principal, identifying the specific competencies to be represented on the principal's team.[5] This district and others reported, as well, an increasing focus on supporting principals through coaching and (job-embedded) professional development.

Among interviewees, one frequently noted change in district perspective was a shift from a "one size fits all" approach to a differentiated approach. Several leaders noted that each school is unique and individual, and that the same interventions may produce different results at different schools. Associated with this were accounts of more flexibility from the district, in regard to budget allocations and efforts to let schools drive the agenda in terms of their needs. It is important to note that some of these districts reported they still hold a bottom line—for example, concerning curriculum—but that specific implementation strategies would be left to the schools. This flexibility at the district level may reflect accountability

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[5] The specific competencies are as follows: that a coach in each school will provide expertise in pedagogy, a department head will be the expert in content, and an MCAS Specialist will be the expert in data analysis.

measures that are in place from the state and the districts: the focus on results allows some pedagogical leeway, enabling the schools to employ instructional strategies and organizational structures that best serve their unique community of learners. One district leader noted that the district's realization that different schools would respond differently to the same intervention signifies a dramatic shift from past practice: "We have to respect—even anticipate—the characteristics of the school, to be sure our efforts will bear fruit. … Past practice in [our district] has been to replicate without the critical reflection on efficacy of implementation and fidelity and outcome." Context is one of the primary considerations for this district when differentiating its support to schools.

Some districts—larger districts, especially—can support an office devoted to data management and analysis. Some interviewees articulated the work of those offices as supports to schools.

> ➢ **Some districts have modified their approaches to data management and use in order to support schools more effectively. Examples of districts' revised approaches to data include the use of data to assess schools' needs, to foster and facilitate necessary (if difficult) conversations, to challenge assumptions and/or to correct incorrect inferences, and to encourage effective, data-driven budgeting. In some districts, efforts are made to strengthen principals' and others' skills with respect to data through embedded professional development opportunities.**

SRG funds are credited with some schools' development of rigorous data systems and implementation. Additionally, some schools invested in professional development to support the use of data for instruction. Last year's interviews and survey results suggested that, to a greater or lesser extent, competence with understanding and interpreting data has been increasing, due in part to the work of coaches and specialists, as well as a variety of professional development strategies. These themes resurfaced, to varying degrees, in the recent round of interviews. Additionally, these interviews suggested some different perspectives on districts' approaches to, and capacities with, the use of data.

Leaders from a few districts discussed an evolving approach to budgeting—described by one leader as "strategic budgeting"—in which the district begins with a focus on student needs (rather than adult needs, as in past practice). One district leader described their improved budget development process by contrasting it with earlier processes: in the past, they looked at budgets first, and then at strategies that could be provided to schools. Now, they look at strategies that may be helpful to schools—based on their data—and develop budgets accordingly. With a sharper focus on student data, districts are better positioned to assess the return on their investments, and to evaluate multiple funding options. Some leaders reported additionally that student data is considered as districts develop sustainability plans, including budgets for schools that will be exiting Level 4 status this year and no longer receiving SRG funds. Moreover, those districts that have taken an aggressive approach toward identifying high-need schools also report taking student data into account as part of their funding plans. Finally, some districts report that their decisions regarding contracting with, and budgeting for, partners' services are increasingly informed by a consideration of student data. Overall, these developments point to districts' efforts to identify the most effective use of resources in terms of past and potential student learning.

A few district leaders spoke of their districts' work with data in terms of the "conversations" that can be generated by looking at data. Each of these leaders offered examples of the ways in which specific data-related events in their districts led to "interesting" and "deep" conversations. In one instance, representatives of the district's data office were working with a school during a regularly scheduled annual review, a process that involves monitoring the school's progress toward its MAGs, as well as attention to specific trends indicated through various disaggregated measures; in this case, the school had identified a gender gap or disparity as a perceived problem. When the district helped the school to test their hypothesis, they discovered that the problem lay, not in gender distribution per se, but rather in that boys had been

disproportionately receiving special education services; it was discovered that the gap between special education and general education was significantly greater than the gap between genders at this school. In fact, the special education population had doubled in the previous year, as a result of changed district policies. The leader remarked that this discovery "turned heads" and lay the "groundwork for interesting conversation." The school and district moved beyond the original notion that gender was explanatory of school's performance, and instead discussed issues related to special education policies, and, perhaps more importantly, how the district and school might use this information to address faculty beliefs and underlying expectations, and to shift staffing and professional development plans to address the change in the student population.

A second example arose from another district's opportunity to use funds newly made available as a result of the Title I waiver (NCLB). Funds that had been previously earmarked for after-school programs could now be used in ways determined by the school to be appropriate. The district took the opportunity to work with principals to help them identify the most appropriate use of these funds. Working in groups, principals were led through a process of matching potential interventions with the identified needs of their students. Principals were assisted with assessing needs, identifying supplemental support, and planning to monitor and evaluate their interventions. At the time of the interview, a 16-week intervention period had just begun, and the leader reported that the principals appreciated the experience. The team effort reportedly helped everyone to feel more comfortable, and the embedded learning opportunity meant that principals could look at the data, take it apart, and make effective decisions. In terms of district capacity-building, this leader highlighted the importance of having a process through which the work could be accomplished: "We worked through a process with these principals. Before, there was no such process."

> **Some districts are demonstrating an increasingly proactive, thoughtful, and strategic approach to deciding whether and/or how to use external partners' services to support their redesign goals.**

As noted above, some districts are beginning to take a look at student learning outcomes as they relate to partners' services. Some districts are following ESE's suggestion to estimate an Academic Return on Investment, and select from among an array of partners' options those services that best match the particular conditions in their districts. Some interviewees described a process of identifying redundancies in the system as a way to plan for future contracting with partners. One district leader expressed a need for a more systematized approach to selecting, using, and evaluating partners, with a particular attention to the needs of the schools that they are serving. She asked, "How do we measure partnerships? How do we guide them? How do we think about what aspects of partnerships to keep?" In this district, part of the reorganization includes the creation of a new position—Director of Partnerships—and a Partnership office to be housed at the central administration. In this leader's estimation, the goal is to craft more district-wide strategy around which partnerships to forge, how to measure work, how to guide particular partners at particular schools, and how to balance their contributions with the abilities of individual school leaders.

> **Some districts demonstrate an increased ability to scale-up: replicating success, but with an eye toward context.**

Now that a number of SRG schools have reached implementation maturity, many districts are reporting organic movements to scale up, employing strategies and practices that are narrowly focused and strategically selected. Improvement efforts branch out from Level 4 schools, and become system-wide and targeted.

In several districts, the positive effects of, and lessons learned from, some school redesign efforts are disseminated from SRG schools to other schools. Several district leaders noted that new practices were implemented, not only in other Level 4 schools, but also in Level 1, 2, and 3 schools in their districts. Some district leaders described processes through which successful practices were brought to the district for discussion, review and eventual dissemination to other schools. A leader from another district described an explicit process of trying to replicate gains across the district: "We look at the rapid gains that have been made in our L4 schools, look at the lessons learned there, and look for ways to replicate them, in sustainable ways."

Echoing the idea that SRG allows experimentation, and that strategies used in a redesign school can be beneficial for schools at all levels, a leader from a small school district stated that SRG opened her district up to innovation, and to thinking differently about schools. As examples of thinking differently, she noted the idea that individual schools have their own identities, and that the district can allow the schools and principals to think about what they want or need. Similarly, she described her district's decision to deploy the redesign school's model for wraparound and student wellness in its other schools. The district now uses adjustment counselors across the district, and is restructuring their Early Childhood office so that it is organized similarly to the wraparound program. To support and facilitate positive change in a struggling Level 3 school, this leader also reported that her district adopted procedures similar to the SRG stakeholder and planning processes. Finally, the leader stated that her district's involvement in collaborative work focused on extending the school day had been a result of their SRG work. Overall, this district leader's account points to organizational shifts resulting from SRG.

Some districts additionally report that as they are trying to replicate successes, they are aware of the importance of context (see Differentiation, above). One leader explained: "Even though we're trying to replicate, we're trying to replicate in the right manner, for the environment, so we get the outcomes we want."

One important finding in this regard is that districts' current efforts to replicate the successes achieved in Level 4 schools denote a cultural shift: Level 4 schools, including SRG schools, have been recast as sources of pride and examples of good practice, rather than sites of repeated failure. In some districts, this is a fairly dramatic shift—in a reversal of the usual trend, in which staff in historically failing schools go to visit and learn from their colleagues in successful schools, leaders recounted examples of staff from L1, 2, and 3 schools coming to visit—and learn from—their colleagues in L4 schools.

> ➤ **The educator evaluator system is being seen by some districts as an opportunity to enhance capacity at various levels of the school and district.**

Changes in policy at the state level also impacted the SRG districts and schools. Described by one leader as "levers for change," the Commonwealth's Race to the Top (RTTT) award required the adoption of RTTT's principal and teacher evaluation system, as well as the new Common Core standards. The leader noted that the initiatives created openings for them to evaluate their practices, align what they are doing at each school, and integrate all of it into a coherent approach to change. She further noted that the imposition of the initiatives depersonalized the issues and acted as a catalyst for conversation. Leaders in a few other districts shared their perception of statewide policy changes as opportunities for reflection and positive change in the area of teacher and principal evaluation, as well as in curriculum and instruction. In contrast, other district leaders reiterated that the requirement to pilot the new teacher evaluation in SY2011–12 was a burden for SRG school leaders and teachers, and one noted that her district was still "playing catch up" with the mandated changes to curriculum. In last year's interviews it was noted that—while many school and district leaders felt that the imposition of the pilot test of the teacher evaluation was punitive—most also expressed their satisfaction with the

evaluation tool, in terms of its utility and alignment with their goals. A couple of leaders in this recent round of interviews described the teacher evaluation system as an opportunity to enhance the skills and qualifications of the evaluators, opening the door to questions such as how to define meaningful feedback and how to give it in a nonjudgmental manner.

School-level Changes Associated with SRG

While this memo has necessarily focused on district-level responses to, and engagement with, redesign and its corollaries, the recent round of interviews did yield important discussions of changes at the school level.

One common refrain among leaders who were interviewed is that the timeframe for SRG allows for change, but that it is compressed, and much of the work in the classroom—an intense focus on implementation of PD and student interventions—does not really take root until the second year. Several leaders noted that the first year is focused on building infrastructure: for example, hiring teachers and coaches, establishing systems for student data collection and analysis, organizing leadership teams, and negotiating contracts with the unions that support redesign efforts.

At least one district leader noted changes at the school level, classroom, and student levels. These include dramatic changes in student stamina around writing and student confidence, and independence as well as changes in teacher practice. The interviewee explained, "Teachers facilitate rather than stand up and deliver. Students know expectations and teachers are mostly on the same page." She attributes this to a behavior program in place at the school, as well as the staff's work with standards, formal assessment, and horizontal and vertical alignment.

Another leader described the high quality instruction being carried out at an SRG school, reflecting concerted effort on the part of the school staff, effective professional development, and collegial support offered before, during, and after school. She cited additional explanatory factors that included: high energy leadership teams that keep people motivated, an unwavering focus on instruction, wraparound, wellness, and the strategic use of technology, which the grant supported.

Interviews suggested a great deal of variability in the definition and practice of the classroom "walkthrough." The common denominator, however, was that many leaders were engaged in a process of refining the process to make it work better for their district and schools. Interviews indicate that many districts have been responsive to the need for walkthroughs that serve the needs of teachers and students, and fit their own culture and context. At one school, district staff are no longer anonymous evaluators with clipboards in hand; rather they spend more time at the school, are known to teachers and students, are welcomed in classrooms, and they conduct informal observations. In this school, multiple observers go into each classroom, and meet later to discuss what they observed. The district leader noted that there is no method for getting this feedback to the specific teachers: instead, the findings are aggregated and used to identify schoolwide needs for coaching and PD. Another district has developed a structured and intensive process for provision of feedback to teachers, including a process for calibration across the various observers.

Across districts, a sampling of reported changes associated with SRG included increased collaboration among teachers, openness to coaching, focus on data to inform instruction, and teacher development through partnerships and coaching. Targeted professional development and common planning time were cited by some interviewees as capacity-building strategies at the school level. Both promote and support effective, aligned instructional practices, as well as contributing to the development of a school culture and common language among educators. Additionally, some interviewees emphasized the value of added time that SRG made possible. One leader described the particular value of teachers' extra time to look at data, plan instruction, and create tiered instruction in order to "get at the heart of children's difficulties." Another leader described SRG's value-added as time to meet for professional development, and for coaches to work with

teachers on improvement—which she described as the key to ongoing teacher feedback that gets beyond and/or supplements the purchasing of specific programs and professional development.

The emergence of a culture of collaboration was identified as a significant change in some Cohort 1 and 2 schools and districts. This is evident, preliminarily, in the accounts of work being done on teams, productive common planning time, and in efforts to build sustainable, successful schools.

A few leaders noted that some district staff now have a greater presence in the schools, are known by staff and students, and that relationships have become less formal and more familiar. One district leader partially attributes the success of a particular school to the fact that her office is located in the school, rather than at the central office, and identifies this as one of the most significant investments her district made. She believes that her placement at the school allows for more of a hands-on, active role, better relationships with staff and students, and ultimately, an ability to carry back a more accurate account to the district.

Some new district procedures are still evolving, as schools and districts build common language and trust, but it is evident from discussions that change is underway.

Challenges to Implementing Redesign

While the discussion thus far has highlighted positive changes—with respect to district approaches to managing reform and schools' engagement in the process—it should be noted that interviewees acknowledge persistent challenges. Most typically, interviewees cited ongoing negotiations with unions, challenges related to recruiting and retaining staff, and capacity (human and financial resources) at the district level.

Reflections on Sustainability

Districts articulated various strategies to support the sustainability of changes associated with SRG. These often involved the strategic use of funds, as well as efforts to strengthen existing practices and build the capacity of human resources. Specific strategies have included: prioritization, reallocation, pooling, and integration of funds; union negotiations to support SRG initiatives and staffing flexibilities; investment in professional development, and other efforts to build and sustain teacher leadership; 'pipeline' strategies; and the gradual phasing out or scaling back of partnerships and initiatives, as schools build internal capacity. Consistent with the SRG framework of collaborative evidence-based practice, districts are partnering with schools to analyze data, determine school needs and priorities, assess the progress of existing efforts, and use the information and reflective dialogue to inform their funding and capacity-building decisions.

The specific strategies listed above are integrally connected. Without union contracts that support extended day and provide flexibility in terms of hiring and placement, for instance, many schools stand to lose teachers in whom they have invested significant PD and team-building efforts, and who have likewise invested in the redesign mission and goals, and supported positive change. In general, union negotiations have been challenging but fruitful, and some districts report the process getting easier as unions begin to see the results and rethink some of their prior principles and reservations. One district successfully negotiated an exemption from union staffing and placement rules—the "bid and bump" system—for the three-year grant period, but was not certain about what was to follow. In negotiations at the time of the interview, the district leader stated that the outlook was positive, and that the union was sympathetic to the idea that keeping the same teachers would help the school's students. Another district was concerned that the traditional bidding/seniority regulations would not necessarily allow them to hire staff who fit particular roles within SRG, and engaged in negotiations with the

union to push for the hiring of staff with specific training and experience, particularly those who would not have to repeat the PD that the schools had already provided to their existing staff.

One of the other sustainability strategies that may be significantly impacted by such negotiations (e.g., the recruitment of a stable teaching staff, investment in targeted PD, and sufficient teacher collaboration time) is the development of teacher leaders and coaches. This sustainability strategy has not only been important to efforts to improve teaching and learning, but has also had the added advantage of being a form of internal capacity-building that does not necessarily require additional funds. In fact, one district explained that, as the grant funding period comes to an end, it is assessing the coaching needs of different schools through data analysis, and plans to phase out some of the coaching positions in schools that have built greater teacher leadership capacities. The same district also described an increasingly centralized district effort to determine which partnerships, or aspects of each partnership, were most valuable and which might be phased out or terminated. One of the leaders from this district noted that their work with partners was part of a more strategic or "intentional" budgeting process overall, and attributed the shift in part to the requested support the district received from the state through its partnership with the District Management Council. Another district leader also spoke about his team's efforts to select partnerships that will provide schools with the capacity-building support necessary to carry on the work after the partners have left or reduced their involvement. These and other district leaders spoke more generally, as well, about the importance of investing in people and in internal capacity-building strategies—in particular teacher leadership development and common planning time (which often ties to extended day)—as opposed to just programs and resources that are more vulnerable to the funding cuts and cliffs.

The examples from two particular districts are notably helpful in seeing some of the integrated strategies that districts are using, both to build capacity, and to secure and allocate resources. One district leader described a process of working with principals to identify priorities from the data, making the decision to prioritize teacher collaboration and leadership development, and then strategizing about how to reappropriate and pool funds from several different sources to invest in an extra hour per day of teacher meeting time. She then connected this back to the importance of having a hiring process (and, by implication, union flexibility) that allows for the recruitment of teachers who know the expectations of working at the school. The other district leader echoed the importance of targeted teacher recruitment and retention, and described the dependence of her district on a strengthened human resources department, and successful union negotiations in this effort. She explained that there is still considerable teacher turnover and challenges recruiting in the district due to contextual factors, such as comparatively low district pay, adult education, and university teaching pools. However, the district's recruitment efforts have been successful: the SRG teachers view their roles as a mission, rather than just a job, and this has resulted in increased teacher stability.

This last district leader also explained that her district has begun to invest in middle management, such as vice principals and department heads, which has helped to create a leadership pipeline that extends beyond just filling principal positions. This district is less fearful than some others about the loss of staff positions, because SRG does not pay for these positions. However, the strategy that the district has used to sustain these and other critical components of SRG is one that was commonly identified across SRG districts: integration of funding from multiple grant sources. In this case, the district has used a combination of grants to fund district-wide professional development and common planning time, and is currently negotiating with the union about the possible use of NCLB waiver flexibilities to fund extended learning time for students.

Feedback to ESE

Overall, feedback to ESE was positive, suggesting helpful and responsive communication, guidance, and support. For most districts, this feedback marked a notable shift: from a more directive, detached, compliance-oriented state approach, to a more supportive, collaborative state–district partnership. One district leader stated, "We no longer feel like it's us against them. We actually feel like we're in this together." Her colleague echoed this sentiment with his comment: "Yeah, they've gone from compliance to a partner. It's just a complete transformation for their department."

As discussed above, one indicator of appreciation for the state's current approach to accountability is the decision by some districts to mirror the state's leveling system, and develop their own coding or prioritization systems for early diagnosis and differentiated support. The adoption of these internal leveling systems appears consistent with the more general message: namely, that SRG and the state accountability system have acted as critical catalysts for district rethinking and restructuring. In some districts, the proactive approach to supporting all schools—either in terms of preventing decline or in transferring successes across the system—reflects enhanced district capacity in terms of strategic planning and managing reform.

The state-facilitated partnerships with SchoolWorks and the District Management Council also appear to be contributing significantly to positive change. District leaders highlighted the value of the MSV process in district, as well as school, reflection, prioritization, and change processes. As mentioned previously, one district used the MSV as a blueprint to develop their own walkthrough protocol. Other leaders gave specific examples of the helpful applications of the MSV feedback in their districts and schools. For instance, one interviewee said that her district team had used the feedback to look critically at the meaning of good instruction, as well as a guide in their efforts to tailor district support to the needs identified by schools. Another district leader explained that the MSV had raised one principal's awareness of teachers' desire for more decision-making power, and sparked a teacher empowerment process that she saw as critical to any school's success. In these discussions, a couple of leaders emphasized the importance of having good evaluators, which they described as those that are able to provide a nonjudgmental outsider perspective, provide constructive feedback as well as criticism, and/or bring meaning and action to the feedback (e.g., helping to calibrate it and apply necessary resources to enable change). The partnerships with the District Management Council were still taking shape, but leaders expressed appreciation for the overall support, and support with specific tasks, such as strategic budgeting.

District leaders also generally praised the state's support with sustainability planning. One message that district leaders and principals conveyed last year was a feeling that there was no plan for sustaining the work after grant funding ended. In particular, some leaders last year noted a disincentive to exit Level 4 status. The state's response, this year, including an exit process for Level 4 schools, as well as workshops and tools to foster planning for sustainability for schools in mid-course, was much appreciated. While a few districts noted that they had been thinking about sustainability from the beginning and already had plans in place before the L4 exit meeting, they still spoke of the value of ESE's meetings, in terms of both the tools provided and the broader opportunity for thinking and collaborating. One leader said that the meeting gave his team a new sense of urgency to plan for the future—looking as far as FY14 and FY15—and provided a helpful process to guide their thinking. Another leader mentioned that one of the principals from her district was "thrilled" to be able to "pick the brain" of another turnaround principal at the meeting. The fact that several districts had already done a great deal of thinking and planning around sustainability before the meeting also pointed to the state's enhanced support in this area, as many leaders reported feeling unprepared for exit last year.

Despite the enhanced support and progress in the area of sustainability planning, district leaders were certainly not without concern. In particular, they expressed fears about the abrupt end to funding, and two leaders specifically expressed a desire for a gradual weaning or phasing out of funds, rather than a severe funding cliff. One leader expressed her concern about the loss of critical staff positions due to this the cliff, and suggested a kind of "trail-off grant" to support

the transition.[6] Another suggested that it would even be helpful to have a couple of additional grant years in order to incorporate the phasing-out process, and specifically requested more guidance from the state in this planning. Other interviewees spoke about their own challenges in strategizing about how to phase out and/or stabilize various programs before the funding deadline.

In several districts, interviewees also expressed a continued desire for increased ESE sensitivity to timelines, the challenge of overlapping demands and initiatives (such as Common Core and the educator evaluation system), and the general need for sufficient time for planning and implementation. One leader spoke in particular about the need to recognize the unique time factors in each district, such as the challenge of adhering to a statewide budget deadline when the passage of the budget is dependent on complex contract negotiations with the union, and the differing planning needs of each school. This comment also seemed to be part of a larger message about the need to recognize the time and energy required for union negotiations, and the dependency of other initiatives and deadlines on these challenging and somewhat unpredictable processes. Other comments also pointed to the time-consuming processes of start-up, and the fact that the grant and MSV timelines do not necessarily take into account these factors. Interviewees specifically noted the lag time between identification as an L4 school and receipt of funding, and the general time it takes to develop and approve plans. Leaders also mentioned the need for sufficient planning time on both the front and back ends of the grant, including adequate time to select a good turnaround principal and to plan for sustainability. Others spoke more generally about the stress of managing multiple initiatives at once in such a limited timeframe, and a couple of leaders questioned the piloting of the educator evaluation system in overburdened L4 schools. One interviewee suggested implementing the evaluation system in chunks or components, rather than at all schools at once.

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[6] Note that this interview was conducted prior to ESE's sustainability planning sessions (December 2012). During those sessions, ESE staff acknowledged that they were working to address this need.