# Evaluation of the Human Resources Pilot

# Final Report

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## Background

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) funded the Human Resources (HR) Pilot initiative as one of three Race to the Top-funded Human Capital Management Initiatives aimed at improving teacher quality in the service of greater student learning. The HR Pilot, developed jointly by the Working Group for Educator Excellence (WGEE) and ESE, supported comprehensive reforms in human resource policies in three pilot districts. This final report of the HR Pilot evaluation addresses the overarching questions: To what extent and in what ways did the HR Pilot attain its goal of reforming district human resources systems to strengthen teacher quality? The report draws on qualitative data collected during site visits to each district in fall 2012, spring 2013, and spring 2014, and phone interviews in fall 2013.

## HR Pilot Initiative Overview

The HR Pilot initiative focused on the goal of effecting systemic changes under seven HR "levers," to drive improvement in teacher knowledge and skills. The seven levers were:

- Recruitment, hiring, and placement
- Induction
- Professional development
- Supervision and evaluation
- Teacher leadership and career advancement
- Organizational structure
- Adult professional culture

Conceptually, HR Pilot would stimulate changes in policy and practice under these seven levers so that they are consistent and aligned to what teachers need to know and are able to do effectively for students to meet content and performance standards.

Three pilot districts were selected for their leadership, positive district-union relationship, and evidence of some progress under at least one of the levers. Attleboro, Brockton, and Revere began planning in 2011 and implementation in 2012. The grant ended in June 2014, for a roughly 2.5-year implementation period.

To implement the HR Pilot locally, the districts formed steering committees to oversee the entire project and subcommittees to work on the levers during the planning stage.

Committee members came from all levels of the system, with representation from classroom, school, and district levels, and from the local union. This committee structure—to differing degrees—became the main vehicle through which the districts identified and implemented changes in policy and practice under various HR levers. The districts also received technical assistance from the WGEE, comprising both cross-district opportunities for sharing and learning and district-specific supports.

## District Accomplishments

Overall, the three HR Pilot districts differed in the levers they actively worked on and the extent to which they made related changes in policy or practice. The common themes included the levers under which the districts could most easily define concrete changes, challenges in addressing adult professional culture, and challenges in aligning the seven levers into a coherent system.

Systems changes in the three pilot districts took place primarily in the areas districts could most concretely define and were aligned most closely with district priorities, such as hiring, induction, and professional development. In particular, the evaluation lever became the vehicle for implementing Massachusetts' new educator evaluation framework and the hub of HR Pilot activities in all three districts.

In implementing specific changes under the HR Pilot, the districts enhanced central office and teacher leadership capacity. Educator evaluation provided an occasion for creating new cadres of teacher leaders in the HR Pilot districts who helped train and support colleagues in the new evaluation process. These specific teacher leaders and the concept of teacher leaders more generally became a tool for supporting other changes—for example, in professional development—in at least one of the HR Pilot districts. The pilot districts also expanded central office capacity to support hiring, recruitment, and new teacher induction.

Districts also made concerted efforts to develop linkages among the other levers, and connections between subsets of levers gradually emerged over the life of the project. However, in the relatively short implementation period, districts had concentrated on activities under specific levers and the districts had not developed an understanding of how to align all the levers into an integrated system.

In particular, adult professional culture was one of the most challenging levers to address directly because committee members found it difficult to identify concrete actions to alter culture districtwide. The processes the districts pursued to implement the HR Pilot nevertheless fostered a culture of wider educator engagement and participation. The committee structures generated opportunities for educators at all levels to add their voices to the decisionmaking process. As a key channel of communication between administrators and teachers on district priorities, the committees promoted greater collaboration between district administrators and other educators.

# Factors Affecting District Accomplishments

Four factors helped explain variation in implementing the local HR Pilot projects in each district: leadership, labor management relations, communication and buy-in, and technical assistance.

In the three districts, the superintendent was the key decisionmaker in agreeing to participate in the HR Pilot. Once implementation was underway, leaders signaled their ongoing support by providing resources for committees, welcoming suggestions for change, and evaluating and following through with changes in priority areas. Superintendent turnover influenced the pace and nature of the work locally.

Successful partnerships between the local union and district management acted as another key factor in the implementation process. Overall, a collaborative relationship built a strong foundation for the local HR Pilot project and smoothed the implementation process for any proposed changes. This foundation helped mitigate to some extent the potential risk to the project resulting from district and union leader turnover.

Districtwide communication about and buy-in to the changes developed under the local HR Pilot projects remained a necessary effort. A limited (albeit committed) cadre of educators comprised the committees and became informed HR Pilot champions in carrying out and communicating HR Pilot-related work. However, despite districts' efforts to build broader support, the majority of staff not directly involved knew little about the goals and details of the initiative, which hindered wider buy-in.

The technical assistance (TA) districts received, comprising both cross-district opportunities for sharing and learning and district-specific supports, varied in applicability. While district participants generally valued the technical assistance, they found the cross-district colloquia topics of varying relevance, depending on their strategic priorities and the progress they had made in implementing specific aspects of their local HR Pilot project. The districts' capacity to benefit from tailored technical assistance—including the extent to which the districts had concrete plans for making any changes under specific levers and were able to define a role for TA—circumscribed the degree and nature of influence that the external TA had in helping launch and propel the local project forward.

# Sustainability

The implementation period for the HR Pilot was roughly 2.5 years, a relatively short time to accomplish any amount of systemic change. Given this foundation, the outlook for sustaining the accomplishments of the HR Pilot projects is mixed, but some positive indicators emerged from the evaluation, suggesting that some changes would indeed be sustained.

Stable district and union leadership significantly increases the likelihood of sustaining a project long term. In two districts, leaders pursued a variety of strategies to try to mitigate the impact of superintendent turnover, including developing the capacity of the next level

of leaders who would remain in place and have the necessary understanding about the purpose of the project to follow through.

Throughout the HR Pilot project, the committee structure has been a key conduit for conveying the voices of a broad base of educators and gave educators the opportunity to become catalysts for change. The districts reported that they are committed to sustaining their steering committees; indeed, two districts are strengthening them—a promising legacy of the HR Pilot.

Formalized policy changes help protect changes made under the HR Pilot projects from fluctuating district priorities and the departure of individual champions. In that respect, the formal state mandate of educator evaluation may help sustain other related changes in the HR Pilot districts, such as professional development systems designed to address needs documented in the evaluation process.

The pilot districts fear the effort will stall without continued financial support. The most important expenditures were arguably the stipends for committee members and time for professional development. With the committee structure emerging as a crucial strategy for teacher voice and professional development a key priority across the districts, the threat to funding affects the heart the local HR Pilot projects' sustainability.

## Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The HR Pilot provided lessons about shared leadership, implementation of complex initiatives, the inherent limitations of technical assistance, and the importance of teacher voice in district decisionmaking. The complexity of the HR Pilot resulted in resulted in districts needing to prioritize across the seven levers, and indeed could not make equal process across all seven during the relatively short implementation period. While districts received technical assistance ranging from colloquia on topics targeted at cross-district interests to district-specific offerings, the effectiveness of technical assistance was constrained by the districts' progress and readiness to take advantage of it. Ultimately, providing opportunities for teacher voice in district decisionmaking via the specific lever committees increased buy-in for particular changes and improved the likelihood that the program would be sustained at the end of the HR Pilot.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) has embarked on an ambitious agenda "to ensure that all students, especially high-needs students, are taught by high-quality teachers who receive all the supports they need to facilitate student learning" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011, p. 4). Its Race to the Top grant provided financial resources for three related human capital management initiatives that established a new educator evaluation framework statewide, new incentive structures in targeted districts, and comprehensive reforms in district-level human resources policies in three pilot districts: Attleboro, Brockton, and Revere.

The Human Resources (HR) Pilot initiative, the third of the Human Capital Management Initiatives, identified seven "levers" that the three pilot districts would reform: recruitment and hiring; induction; professional development; supervision and evaluation; teacher leadership and career advancement; organizational structure; and adult professional culture. The evaluation of the HR Pilot explored the three districts' strategies to define the specific human resources policies and practices they would prioritize under each lever, documented the changes districts enacted, and tracked prospects for sustainability. Specifically, the evaluation addressed to what extent and how the HR Pilot achieved its major goal of reforming district human resources systems to strengthen teacher quality.

To address the main research purpose, the evaluation focused on overall program successes and challenges as evidenced by the three districts' experiences in defining and implementing their local reforms. The goal of the evaluation was not to assess the individual districts' efforts, but rather to unearth insights and useful lessons about implementation and district change.

While the evaluation findings center on the HR Pilot implementation in three specific contexts, the HR Pilot is also an instance of district reform in general. As such, the evaluation findings apply to districts across the Commonwealth as they gain experience with the new educator evaluation process. District leaders examining educator evaluation results for their districts may see implications for changing policies and practices in induction, professional development, organizational structures, and adult professional culture—levers identified under HR Pilot—to facilitate and strengthen educator evaluation practices.

The data for this report come from interviews, focus groups, and documents collected from phone interviews of a smaller sample of respondents involved in the HR Pilot project in fall 2013 and during site visits to each HR Pilot district in fall 2012 and spring 2013 and 2014. While on site, researchers interviewed key stakeholders at all levels of the system who were involved in the local implementation of the HR Pilot, including teachers, principals, union representatives, and district staff. Over time, site visit activities broadened to include district and school staff not involved with the local HR Pilot to understand the extent to which policy and practice changes initiated under the project had taken hold systemwide.

The next section of this report provides an overview of the HR Pilot, presenting a conceptual framework that details the program strategies and intended outcomes. We then review the districts' main accomplishments under the HR Pilot, which is followed by a discussion of the key factors that influenced districts' local project implementation. We examine indicators that suggest whether the districts will be able to sustain the changes they made under the HR Pilot, and conclude with lessons learned about implementing districtwide reforms in human resources policies and practices.

# Chapter 2: HR Pilot Program Overview

With funding from Race to the Top, ESE and the Working Group for Educator Excellence (WGEE) collaborated to develop the HR Pilot as one of the initiatives to improve student learning through improved teacher quality.[1] A WGEE paper describing the HR Pilot stated:

> The purpose of the [HR Pilot] project…is not just to put a big map of professional knowledge on the table. It is to give teachers systematic access to that body of knowledge and skill and provide the accountability, the support, and the working environment for all teachers to be constantly learning and using more of it, no matter how competent and experienced they already are. Nothing will do more to raise student achievement than that.[2]

The WGEE operationalized the initiative by defining seven human resources "levers" that support teacher quality and launched local HR Pilot projects in three districts selected through a competitive application process. The WGEE guided the districts in defining the project, providing a structure for planning and organizing committees to examine the levers, and maintained direct contact with district leaders throughout the project to help manage it. The lever committees included teachers, other school staff (e.g., guidance counselors, social workers, speech therapists), principals, and district administrators

**HR Pilot Levers**

1. Recruitment, hiring, and placement
2. Induction
3. Professional development
4. Supervision and evaluation
5. Teacher leadership and career advancement
6. Organizational structure
7. Adult professional culture

in an effort to develop broad-based participation in the local HR Pilot. WGEE served as the technical assistance provider to the three HR Pilot districts, providing a variety of supports that included:

- Assisting districts in conducting an initial needs assessment and developing implementation plans for each of the seven levers;

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[1] WGEE is a broad coalition and includes many stakeholders statewide, including various state professional organizations (Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), Massachusetts Association of School Personnel Administrators (MASPA), etc.), higher education, and teacher unions. In addition to collaborating in developing the HR Pilot initiative, WGEE also provided technical assistance to the three districts in planning and implementing their local projects.

[2] Excerpted from J. Saphier and S. Freedman, WGEE Internal Draft Anchor Paper, received via personal communication between authors and evaluation team, August 3, 2012.

- Providing opportunities for cross-district collaboration, including colloquia that brought in speakers on topics pertinent to HR Pilot implementation and role-alike groups for district leaders, union leaders, and school leaders from across the districts to share problems and solutions; and
- Offering district-specific assistance based on annual needs assessments or as needed based on implementation progress.

The HR Pilot project included two stages. The districts first completed a planning stage in 2011, establishing committees that produced work plans for each of the seven levers. The districts were required to submit these plans to ESE to continue with HR Pilot implementation. After this initial planning, districts identified priorities for implementation and differed in whether they worked on all seven levers under their local HR Pilot project. The implementation phase ran approximately 2.5 years from spring 2012 to summer 2014.

The conceptual framework (Exhibit 1) details both a general schematic for implementing the three local projects and serves as a guide for understanding the project within each district's unique context. The upper portion of the conceptual framework shows the contextual variables presumed to affect each district's capacity to undertake the HR Pilot. It also indicates that technical assistance served as input into the district-level planning process. The HR Pilot projects were situated within each district's local context, including labor market conditions, human capital capacity, student demographics, and school performance history. The conditions for success, including strong and stable leadership, coherence of multiple initiatives, adequate resources, and collaborative management-labor relationships, are factors that could reasonably be expected to mediate district accomplishments under the HR Pilot.

## Exhibit 1. Conceptual Framework

**Federal and State Policy Context**

- Race to the Top          • Educator Evaluation

**Human Resources Pilot Project**

**Technical Assistance**

- Cross-district colloquia
- Coherence coach
- District-specific consulting

**District Planning**

- Goals
- Readiness
- Engaged stakeholders

**Local Context**

- Labor market conditions          • Existing human capital policies/practices
- Student demographics          • School performance history

**Conditions for Success**

- Strong and stable leadership          • Adequate resources and supports
- Coherence of multiple initiatives          • Collaborative labor/management relations

Recruitment, Hiring and Placement

Teacher Leadership and Career Advancement

Induction

**TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL**

Supervision and Evaluation

Professional Development

**Organizational Structure Adult Professional Culture**

**District System Changes**

- New HR policies, practices, and products
- Alignment of HR policies
- Expanded educator participation in district decisionmaking
- District and school culture
- District and school leadership capacity

**Outcomes***

- Improved educator knowledge and skill
- Improved student learning

\* Teacher and student outcomes were not within the scope of the HR Pilot evaluation.

The lower portion of the conceptual framework outlines the implementation process. The diagram in the lower left shows the seven human resource levers defined as the main foci for the HR Pilot. At the heart of the cycle are teacher knowledge and skills that form the content for the levers. The arrows between the levers indicate presumed connections that will lead to an aligned system of human resources, such as linking recruitment, hiring, and teacher induction practices; tying compensation, tenure, and supports to evaluation results; and developing teacher leadership and career pathways.

The district system changes are early or proximal outcomes of implementation, which are discussed in this report. In addition to new HR policies and practices and the alignment across the seven levers, district system changes targeted in the initiative include expanded educator participation in district decisionmaking, changing the professional culture in schools and districtwide, and bolstering district capacity to support schools and school instructional leadership capacity. The long-range outcomes, which extend beyond the scope and time span of the evaluation, include enhancing educators' skill and knowledge and ultimately improving instruction and student learning.

This conceptual framework explicitly acknowledges the role of the local district context, including the student and teacher characteristics we summarize next.

## HR Pilot District Contexts

When the districts applied to participate in the HR Pilot, they submitted evidence of positive district-union relations, proactive strategies in at least one HR function targeted by the seven levers, and overall leadership commitment to and understanding of the project. In addition to these indicators of the districts' readiness for the HR Pilot, the districts' unique contexts—including teacher and student demographics and school performance— further defined their human capital needs and influenced their implementation of HR Pilot strategies. The contextual data presented below begins in 2008–09, 3 years before the districts launched their local HR Pilot project, and ends with the latest data available to illustrate the districts' trajectory prior to and through HR Pilot implementation.

## Student Characteristics

Student enrollment in Attleboro and Revere are similar, while Brockton enrollment is almost three times larger (Exhibit 2). From 2008–09 through 2013–14, Attleboro enrollment was largely stable. In contrast, Revere and Brockton experienced steady student enrollment growth during that same period, generating demand for additional teachers in those districts.

### Exhibit 2. Student Enrollment, 2008–09 Through 2013–14, by District

|  | 2008–09 | 2009–10 | 2010–11 | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | 2013–14 | Percent change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Attleboro** | 5,937 | 5,933 | 5,855 | 5,933 | 5,902 | 5,862 | -1.2% |
| **Brockton** | 15,312 | 15,502 | 15,828 | 16,162 | 16,595 | 17,011 | 11% |
| **Revere** | 6,033 | 6,145 | 6,229 | 6,519 | 6,648 | 6,831 | 13% |

Source: Massachusetts Department of ESE, Enrollment Data,
http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00160000&orgtypecode=5&

The proportion of racial/ethnic minority students also increased in all three districts from 2008–09 through 2013–14. Revere and Brockton enrollments have a majority of minority students, with Brockton at 75% and Revere at almost 60% (Exhibit 3). Reflecting this demographic change, the English language learner (EL) population also increased in all three districts over that same time period,[3] generating the need for teachers trained in EL strategies and cultural competencies.

### Exhibit 3. Student Ethnicity, 2013–14, by District

|  | African American | Hispanic | White | Other[a] | Total Non-White | Change in Non-White population (2008–09 to 2013–14) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Attleboro** | 4.6% | 12.8% | 72.9% | 9.8% | 27.2% | +4.4% |
| **Brockton** | 54.9% | 14.4% | 23.5% | 7.2% | 76.4% | +7.0% |
| **Revere** | 4.4% | 46.1% | 40.9% | 8.6% | 59.1% | +5.2% |

[a] The "Other" category includes Asian, Native American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Multiracial Students.
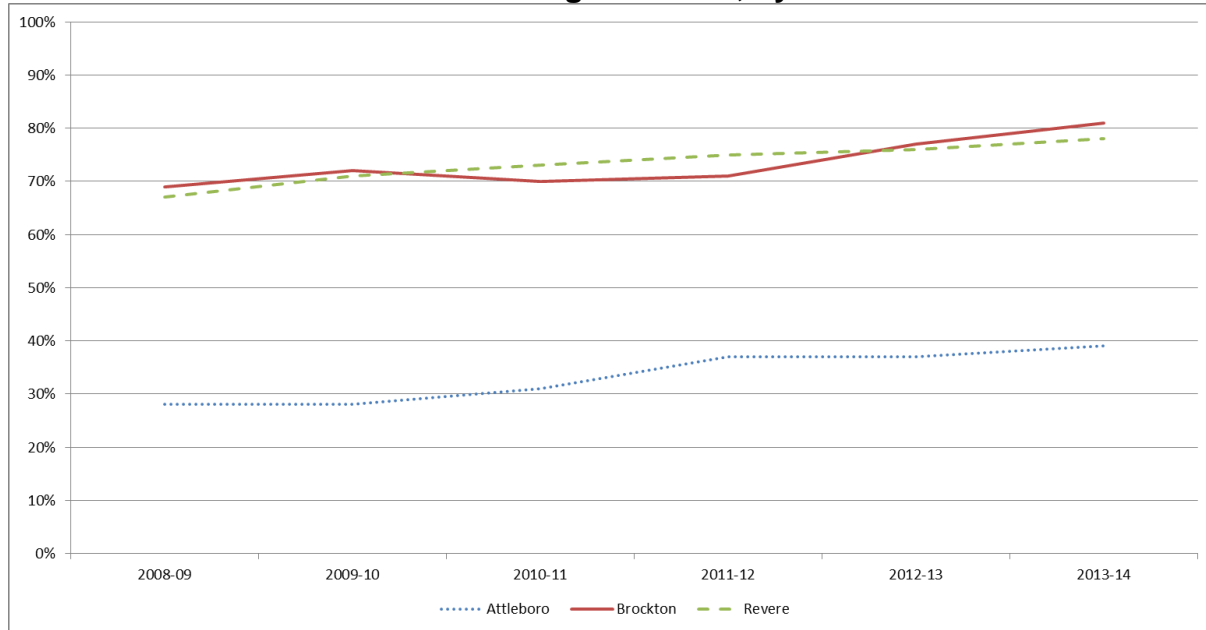Source: Massachusetts Department of ESE, Enrollment Data,
http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00160000&orgtypecode=5&

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[3] The percent of EL students in Attleboro increased from 4% to 8% from 2008–09 to 2013–14. In Brockton and Revere, those proportions increased from 17% to 20% and 10% to 14%, respectively.

In addition, all three districts saw a consistent increase from 2008–09 to 2013–14 in the number of low-income students served, to approximately 80% of students each in Brockton and Revere and 40% in Attleboro (Exhibit 4).

**Exhibit 4. Percentage of Low-Income Students,
2008–09 Through 2013–14, by District**



Source: Massachusetts Department of ESE, Selected Population Data,
http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00160000&orgtypecode=5&leftNavId=305&

Although not new in any of the districts, supporting high-needs students under a high-stakes accountability system places urgency on teachers to overcome challenges their colleagues in more affluent districts do not face to the same degree. Meeting these challenges has implications for recruitment, induction, professional development strategies, and for approaches to teacher evaluation, which are all levers targeted by the HR Pilot.

## Teacher Characteristics

The relative size of the teaching force in the three HR Pilot districts reflects the differences in student enrollment. Brockton's teacher corps is more than double those of Attleboro and Revere (Exhibit 5). Over time, the increase in Revere's teaching force kept pace with its student enrollment growth, and the number of teachers in Attleboro remained relatively flat, as did its student enrollment. In Brockton, however, the number of teachers remained flat from 2008–09 through 2013–14, despite the increased number of students in the district. These trends in the size of the teaching force indicate that recruiting and hiring took on an increasing importance in Revere, and although Brockton may have anticipated the need to hire more teachers (beyond replacement for attrition), their fiscal situation limited their hiring.

**Exhibit 5. Number of Full-Time Equivalent Teachers, 2008–09 Through 2013–14, by District**

|  | 2008–09 | 2009–10 | 2010–11 | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | 2013–14 | Percent change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Attleboro** | 395 | 383 | 365 | 371 | 389 | 391 | -1.0% |
| **Brockton** | 1,107 | 1,099 | 1,066 | 1,088 | 1,064 | 1,113 | 0.5% |
| **Revere** | 435 | 425 | 444 | 458 | 488 | 507 | 14.2% |

Source: Massachusetts Department of ESE, Teacher Data,
http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/teacher.aspx?orgcode=00160000&orgtypecode=5&

Two additional metrics—the percentage of teachers licensed in their respective teaching assignments and the percentage of core academic classes taught by teachers who are highly qualified—have been relatively high across the three HR Pilot districts.[4] Brockton in particular increased the percentage of teachers licensed in-field and the percentage of core classes taught by highly qualified teachers from 2008–09 through 2012–13 (Exhibit 6).

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[4] Teachers are designated as "highly qualified" if they (a) possess a bachelor's degree, (b) possess a Massachusetts teaching license, and (c) have demonstrated subject matter competency in each of the core subjects they teach using a specific option included in federal legislation.

**Exhibit 6. Percentage of Teachers Licensed in Assignment and Percentage of Core Academic Classes Taught by Highly Qualified Teachers, 2008–09 to 2012–13, by District**

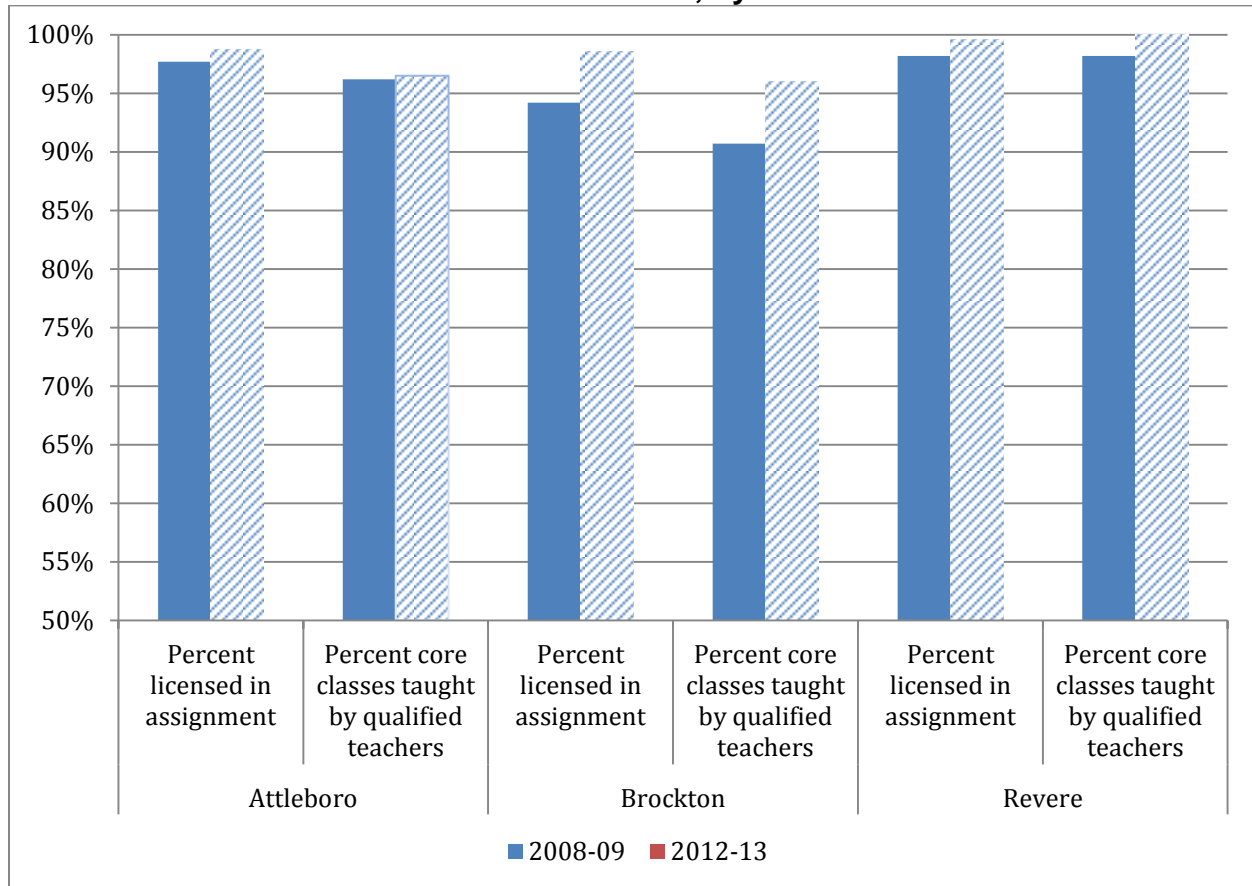

Source: Massachusetts Department of ESE, Teacher Data,
http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/teacher.aspx?orgcode=00160000&orgtypecode=5&&fycode=2013

## Student Performance and District Capacity

The HR Pilot districts' performance on student outcomes provides another indicator of how urgently district leaders might have viewed the need to improve student achievement. Under the Massachusetts accountability system, student performance is measured by a Progress and Performance Index (PPI).[5] During the 5-year period ending 2012–13, Brockton experienced a notable growth in their PPI (Exhibit 7). Attleboro and Revere fluctuated and did not change much in PPI over the long term. Attleboro consistently had the highest PPIs, suggesting that it began the HR Pilot with a different set of accountability imperatives from those in Brockton and Revere.

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[5] Annual PPI measures the improvement that groups make towards targets over a 2-year period on up to seven different indicators, including proficiency gaps, growth, and graduation and dropout rates. The cumulative PPI is the average of annual PPIs over the most recent 4-year period (2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012), weighting the later years the most. For a school to be considered "on target" in making progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps, the cumulative PPI for both the "all students" group and high-needs students must be 75 or higher.

**Exhibit 7. Annual and Cumulative Progress and Performance Indices (PPIs) for All Students, by District**

|  | 2009–10 | 2010–11 | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | Cumulative (4-Year) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Attleboro** | 96 | 75 | 89 | 68 | 79 |
| **Brockton** | 39 | 36 | 54 | 64 | 53 |
| **Revere** | 61 | 54 | 54 | 57 | 56 |

Source: Massachusetts Department of ESE, Accountability Information, http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/accountability/report/district.aspx?linkid=30&orgcode=02480000&orgtypecode=5&

Underlying this portrait of average student performance are widely varying individual school performance ratings and progress in the HR Pilot districts (Exhibit 8). Such variation is nuanced. For example, elementary and middle schools in Attleboro had much higher performance percentiles (overall performance relative to other schools that serve the same or similar grades) in the district compared to the high school, creating a large range of performance in that district but pointing to a concentrated need at the secondary level. In contrast, the performance of schools in Brockton and Revere were spread more evenly across the spectrum.

The range in progress towards narrowing the proficiency gaps, improving student achievement, reducing dropouts, and raising the graduation rate (among other areas as measured by PPI) is similarly large within each district and differs across the districts. For example, Attleboro schools cluster above the "on target" (as defined by the state) mark of 75 on the 0 to 100 PPI scale, while schools in the other districts clustered at the lower end of the scale.

**Exhibit 8. Range of Performance and Progress of Individual Schools, 2012–13, by District**
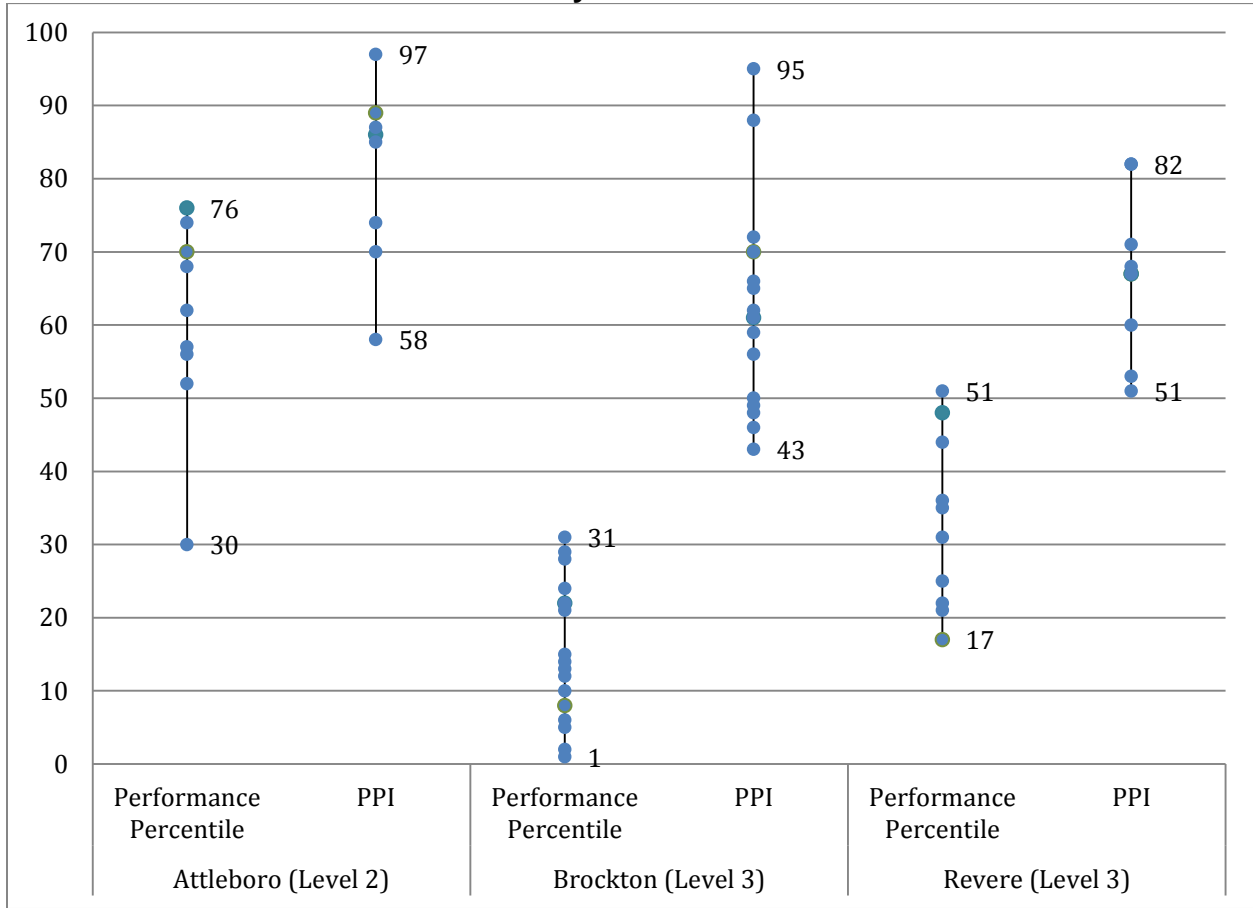
All Massachusetts schools with sufficient data are classified by ESE into five performance levels. Eighty percent of all schools fall into Levels 1 and 2, the highest classifications. Schools are classified Level 3 if they are among the lowest 20% relative to other schools in their grade span, if they serve the lowest performing subgroups statewide, or if they have persistently low graduation rates.

Districts are then classified based on their lowest performing school or schools. For Level 3, districts with one Level 3 school are put into the same classification as a district with multiple Level 3 schools (but no Level 4 schools). While the state intended this classification rule to ensure that districts pay attention to the needs of their lowest performing schools, this creates a continuum containing a broad spectrum of school performance that makes the distinctions between the levels less clear-cut than one would expect. For example, a Level 3 district with a large number of Level 3 schools likely faces very similar capacity challenges as a Level 4 district with a single Level 4 school and a large number of Level 3 schools. Exhibit 9 shows the district classification and the number of schools at each level for the three HR Pilot districts. The imperatives to improve student performance in the HR Pilot districts raised the question of whether and to what extent the HR Pilot's focus on the seven specific levers might ultimately address student learning.

**Exhibit 9. District Performance Levels, 2013**

| | Number of Schools | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **School District (Level)** | **Level 1** | **Level 2** | **Level 3** |
| **Attleboro (Level 2)** | 6 | 3 | 0 |
| **Brockton (Level 3)** | 0 | 6 | 12 |
| **Revere (Level 3)** | 2 | 7 | 1 |

Source: Massachusetts Department of ESE, Accountability Information, http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/accountability/report/district.aspx?linkid=30&orgcode=02480000&orgtypecode=5&

These background student and teacher data provide a picture of the three HR Pilot districts, each facing a changing student body; two experiencing rapid student enrollment growth but only one able to keep up with a larger teacher force; and diverse school performance within each district.

# Chapter 3: District System Changes

By the end of the 2.5-year implementation period, the HR Pilot stimulated positive results, albeit unevenly across the seven levers and across the three districts. In particular, districts changed processes and practices around human resources, increased district and school leadership capacity to better support teachers, and expanded the role of principals and teachers in district decisionmaking.

## Changes in District Capacity

The HR Pilot districts implemented a variety of changes in both policy and practice aimed at increasing their capacity to support teachers.

**Districts made greatest progress on concrete levers that reflected local priorities.**

District priorities and clear purpose directing the efforts under a given lever helped explain the differential implementation across levers and across districts. Most commonly, HR Pilot work led to changes in policies and practices related to recruitment and hiring, induction, and professional development—all levers with clearly defined goals that leaders saw as immediately relevant to improving district instructional capacity.

All three districts instituted new procedures to promote more efficient and consistent hiring practices and modified their preexisting induction programs to provide stronger support to new teachers. One district, for example, created a new hiring protocol to standardize hiring procedures, such as forming a hiring committee, appointing committee members, and determining interview questions to ask candidates. Another district experimented with attending a wide variety of job fairs at local colleges and universities and eventually narrowed down the list to those that yielded the largest number of hires. The induction committee in the third district developed policies to match newly hired teachers to mentors more effectively and to differentiate between supports for teachers who are new to the profession and supports for experienced teachers new to the district.

All three districts also made changes to their professional development efforts. One district, which had eliminated citywide professional development in the years prior to the HR Pilot project, reinstated that professional development to target specific needs such as Common Core State Standards implementation and other areas of weakness as identified in achievement data. In another district, the professional development lever committee surveyed all educators to identify their needs and took responsibility for logistics, which had previously been handled by another committee. Teachers in the district reported that professional development improved with more options that were relevant, coherent, and ongoing.

Propelled by the state's new mandated educator evaluation system being implemented during the same time period as the HR Pilot, districts also made significant changes to their evaluation policies and practices. Across all three districts, respondents reported that the new system motivated educators to be more reflective about their practice via goal setting, evidence gathering, and participating in the assessment of their own teaching practice.

> *"I think it [goal setting] is making us better teachers because we have to [have a plan for] how are you going to measure the goals. How are you going to know your goal is effective at the end of the year? So having that piece in place, although it is a lot of work, it is beneficial."*
>
> *- Teacher*

In contrast, districts made less progress on the levers for which concrete policies did not exist at the start of the project, for which objectives were difficult to define, or when other district priorities superseded the work of the levers. As one district leader said, "This is hard work because you have to make decisions that are priorities, and because you don't have infinite time or money, you have to [decide to] do something instead of something else and [make] hard tradeoffs."

Adult professional culture was arguably the most difficult lever to address even though it was intended to be the foundation for all other levers as outlined in the conceptual framework. In the districts that formed adult professional culture committees, the members struggled throughout most of the project to define district culture and craft strategies to improve that culture. It was not until late in the grant period that the committees finally found a way forward. In one district, after a year of struggling to articulate their task, the adult professional culture committee concluded that culture actually played a key role in the work of all the levers. Consequently, in the second year of the project, the committee disbanded and distributed its members across the other lever committees to raise awareness of professional culture issues in planning and strategy discussions about the other levers. Moving forward, the committee intends to reconfigure itself as an independent group to plan how their work will progress. In another district, after a long dormant period, the adult professional culture committee was reformed with new members to analyze and use the TELL MASS Survey to devise a new plan for improving district culture.[6] Eventually, the superintendent took over leadership of the subcommittee, at the request of the steering committee, to refocus its mission.

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[6] The TELL MASS Survey is a statewide survey of school-based licensed educators to determine if they have the supports necessary for effective teaching. Survey topics include professional development, school and teacher leadership, and instructional practices and support. Source: http://www.tellmass.org/about.

**Districts made changes in key systems that produced greater efficiencies and enhanced teacher leadership capacity.**

Under work related to the HR Pilot, districts streamlined systems, enhanced teacher leadership opportunities, and sought to bolster district capacity. For example, respondents reported that hiring processes became more efficient as the districts brought their hiring and recruitment processes online. The new hiring processes helped districts tap into a broader pool of qualified candidates and streamlined the application review process. Another district provided teachers with access to a "one-stop" professional development platform to locate professional development opportunities within and outside the district. To streamline the educator evaluation process, two of the districts put in an online system where teachers can enter their SMART (Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Results-focused, and Timely) goals, upload evidence, and receive feedback from their evaluators.

The new educator evaluation system rollout in another district expanded teacher leader capacity through a train-the-trainer process. These new teacher leaders began serving as a resource for addressing other teachers' questions, diffusing negative perceptions of the new evaluation system, and supporting its implementation. This model was so well received in this district that the same process was used to create districtwide professional learning groups led by trained teacher leaders. One principal remarked that these new teacher leaders were twice as effective as those who had not gone through the training. More broadly, this district experienced a paradigm shift about their expectations for when a teacher can become a leader: "If someone new wants to present at a faculty meeting or provide a professional development session, we encourage that. It's a shift in thinking. We feel that new teachers bring in fresh ideas. We are open to their knowledge and skills. You don't have to be tenured to offer good ideas."

In addition, as districts engaged in a deeper analysis of their human resources functions, they created or sought to create new positions at the central office to respond to district needs. Two districts added mentor coordinator positions at each level—elementary, middle, and high school—to ensure greater support for new teachers. In one district, these mentor coordinators were responsible for training mentors each year, setting the curriculum for districtwide mentor-mentee monthly meetings, and monitoring weekly individual mentor-mentee meetings. A district administrator reported that the extra mentor coordinators meant that the mentors were better trained and prepared than in the past and that the district could monitor what was happening during the mentoring process and could provide some assurance on its quality. The new superintendent in another district recognized the large gaps in capacity within the organization that were detrimental to the district's ability to support teachers and create a well-rounded student. As a first step to closing those gaps, he created the position of director of student services and planned to make additional hires, such as directors of information technology and transportation, to better support teaching and learning.

**Districts integrated certain levers, but aligning all seven levers remained a challenge.**

The original theory of action, as shown in the conceptual framework, encouraged districts to develop a comprehensive human capital management development system that spans an educator's entire career and that integrates a knowledge base of professional teaching and learning. However, the initial technical assistance provided to districts focused on supporting individual lever committees to determine district needs and develop their initial action plans. As a result, alignment to a knowledge base of teaching did not develop and was not an explicit part of districts' efforts to align human resources policies and practices until much later in the life of the project. Without clear and focused objectives to align to, and given the historically isolated nature of district functions, lever committees unsurprisingly concentrated on completing their own respective missions during the early stages of implementation with little attention to the work of the other levers or how strategies across different levers might interact.

As the initiative matured, however, the districts made a concerted effort to develop and nurture linkages among levers. For example, in two districts, lever committees regularly reported to the steering committee, which then acted as a "hub" to identify linkages and eliminate redundancies among the work of the different committees. In addition, in one of these districts, at least one representative of each lever committee sat on the steering committee to provide input on what each committee was working on and to explore ways the committees could work together.

Consequently, connections among a subset of the levers emerged over the life of the project. In particular, some of the districts early on recognized the natural link between the evaluation system and professional development. One district, for example, used evaluation results to identify common areas of weakness among all teachers in the district and what the district could do to support teachers. It also utilized its online professional development system to link professional development options to SMART goals under the educator evaluation. In another district, some school leaders and evaluators used the results of the evaluation to propose professional development opportunities. Moving forward, it would be instructive to document which connections, perhaps with evaluation indeed at the hub, might lead to more effective alignment among district human resource functions.

> *"We put so much emphasis on [educator] evaluation...I used to think that evaluation was 'the thing," but evaluation in and of itself isn't really the thing at all. It should be the vehicle by which we drive the other things. What do we need for PD [professional development]? I don't know, what do the evaluations say we need?"*
>
> *- District Administrator*

# Cultural Changes

Although the adult professional culture subcommittees had little direct influence on district practices during the life of the project, the overall work of the local Human Resources Pilot projects nevertheless helps to reshape district culture. In particular, the process by which the districts undertook the local HR Pilot project, namely increasing opportunities for educators to engage in decisionmaking, indirectly affected the district culture.

**Inclusive participation opportunities enhanced teacher voice and empowered teachers.**

The HR Pilot project created opportunities for educators at all levels to add their voices to district decisionmaking as members of the steering committee or the lever committees. In two districts, more than 70 teacher and school leaders served on a committee at some point during the life of the project, and both districts planned to expand the number of educators involved by rotating in new members on a regular basis. While serving on these committees, educators helped develop plans for modifying district processes, practices, and policies, such as devising new strategies to improve hiring and induction practices, assisting the district in selecting professional development opportunities and setting up more efficient professional development logistics, and rolling out the new educator evaluation system.

> *"[As a result of the Human Resources Pilot], more people [are] involved in districtwide issues that affect everybody. We've got people questioning how we can do this [making and implementing district human resources policies] better and where we can go with it [the work of the HR Pilot project]. [Educators are] seeing a forum for change. I think that's huge. That's a culture shift."*
>
> *-Union leader*

With more voice in decisionmaking, teachers in two districts felt more engaged and empowered. One school leader shared that because the district adopted a participatory approach in its HR Pilot work, teachers were more likely to debate and even disagree with him, which influenced his decisionmaking. The teachers experienced a greater openness to sharing ideas within their districts and schools and felt that they had a real impact on district policy and practices. For example, the steering committee, not district leaders, decided that a plan from the teacher leadership committee to create a principal apprenticeship program was not feasible due to a lack of funding. As discussed in further detail in Chapter 5, greater teacher voice is a promising best practice in building buy-in among teachers and sustaining the local HR Pilot projects beyond the grant.

**Engagement in the HR Pilot initiative shifted district culture and increased collaboration.**

Although adult professional culture was the most difficult lever for committees to make progress on, districts experienced changes in district culture and increased collaboration as a result of widespread participation in the HR Pilot work. District leaders believed greater educator participation improved the transparency of how and why decisions were made and engendered more ownership among teachers in decisionmaking. Respondents also reported that district leaders sharing leadership responsibilities with teachers contributed to a positive cultural shift. One district leader said that the HR Pilot initiative "changed the culture between the district and the rank-and-file…. The ultimate measure of success is how many teachers we've gotten involved in the decisionmaking."

Districts also created new structures that promoted greater collaboration. For example, one district successfully piloted and expanded professional learning groups, and another district tried (with isolated pockets of success) to expand common planning time policies beyond the middle school to its elementary schools and high school.

In addition to these intentional plans, increased collaboration was a positive, unintended consequence of the initiative. Respondents in two districts reported that improved professional development resulted in more sharing and interdisciplinary activity. The district that had reinstated citywide professional development released all teachers in the same grade level simultaneously so that they could gather in a single locale, experience the professional development together, and discuss with each other how they might use the instructional strategies they learned in the classroom. Implementation of the new educator evaluation system also sparked changes in collaboration between educators in one district. Teachers used common planning time more productively and regular conversations among teachers became routine. Finally, educator involvement in the local HR Pilot projects itself created new opportunities for collaboration across and within schools as educators worked together to tackle important district issues.

The original purpose of the HR Pilot initiative was to create more efficient and effective district functions to better support and hold teachers accountable for improving their own practice and ultimately to improve student performance. At this point in implementation, however, most respondents said that it was too early to see any changes in teaching practice as a result of the HR Pilot project.

# Chapter 4: Factors Affecting District Accomplishments

While the three HR Pilot districts applied and demonstrated a readiness to implement the project locally, their experiences and successes in doing so varied widely. In this chapter, we explore factors that help explain that variation. The first three factors relate to internal aspects of the district: district leadership, labor-management relations, and communication about the initiative. The fourth factor pertains to the districts' experiences with technical assistance provided by WGEE.

## District Leadership

Leadership matters in any endeavor and not least of all in district reform. The broad literature on leadership documents the benefits associated with effective district leaders (e.g., improving student outcomes, developing a culture that demands high quality instruction, offering meaningful professional development [Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; McFarlane, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006]). In the case of the HR Pilot initiative, the district leaders who early on were able to make meaning of the HR Pilot project for their local needs, create visible successes that maintained reform momentum, and embrace an inclusive approach to district decisionmaking made the most progress towards the intended goals of the HR Pilot initiative.

**District leaders demonstrated early commitment to the HR Pilot concepts.**

The superintendent was the primary driver in determining HR Pilot participation in the three districts. The district leaders at the time the HR Pilot launched chose to participate as part of an overall effort to improve teacher quality, as well as to facilitate educator evaluation implementation. Their early commitment to shape the HR Pilot project as a strategic initiative to achieve district priorities set the stage for whether and how district and school staff engaged in the HR Pilot. In two districts, the superintendents concluded that all levers within the HR Pilot fit the districts' goals or strategic plan. For example, the leader of one of those districts recognized a need to make district policy decisions more transparent and to increase consistency in implementing HR policies across schools. In the third district, the superintendent identified a subset of the levers that fit within his existing strategic plan and thus adopted a narrower scope for the local HR Pilot. In retrospect, a district representative shared that the decision to adopt a subset of levers impacted the implementation process: "[District leaders] have to understand [the project], but it was amorphous. You had to go through [determining the role of the project] and have your aha moment.… It's not going to work when you take it piecemeal."

District leadership further signaled support for the HR Pilot by sanctioning time and resources for the steering committee and lever committees to pursue changes under each lever. First, these district leaders provided the committees with autonomy to analyze current policies, and practices and were open to suggestions for change. For example, the supervision and evaluation committee in two districts played a pivotal role in the initial introduction of the new educator evaluation and helped to generate a relatively positive response districtwide. Second, the superintendents in two districts vested the steering committees and lever committees with authority to spend resources both externally (e.g., subscribing to external organizations) and internally (e.g., attending trainings).

Throughout implementation, the superintendents that adopted the HR Pilot as a cornerstone of their district improvement strategy were active in addressing the barriers typical of the change process. For example, lever committees struggled to make progress on the initiative while continuing regular district operations and negotiating competing district priorities. The superintendent and other district administrators motivated the committee members by finding needed resources and expertise and reassuring them about the process. Stating that roadblocks are common when making significant decisions, one district administrator suggested that the committee keep debating various perspectives as it provides "insight on what caused roadblocks. [It is] okay to have a tough time on this part. It is good to give [each other] feedback…to not have pure agreement." Where such proactive leadership was absent, some lever committees were stymied in making decisions and made less progress.

**District leaders included a greater number of staff in making district decisions.**

The WGEE wove participatory decisionmaking into its view of district leadership. This principle, however, was entirely contingent on the district superintendents' comfort and growth towards sharing authority. In experimenting with more distributed leadership, one district leader noted that the input of multiple perspectives via the lever committees created a "transformational structure for the way work is done in the district and schools [as teachers] truly have ownership in decisionmaking in the district." For this district leader, adopting such an inclusive strategy requires "transforming how superintendents function and see [their] role" in making decisions.

# Labor-Management Relationship

Local unions can play a key role in facilitating or hindering district reforms, especially with respect to any changes affecting teachers' working conditions and responsibilities (Donaldson, Mayer, Cobb, LeChasseur, & Welton, 2013; Kerchner & Koppich, 2000). Conducive labor-management relations was a readiness factor in the original selection of the HR Pilot districts and influenced how the districts designed and rolled out any changes related to the HR Pilot levers.

**Collaborative labor-management relationships smoothed the implementation process.**

Strong labor-management relationships from the outset in all three HR Pilot districts provided a collaborative foundation for implementing the HR Pilot project. District leaders prioritized consistent communication with union leaders, and met regularly to engage in collaborative decisionmaking regarding all important issues in the district. The union

> *"Union partnership is critical to the success of the HR Pilot program."*
>
> *-District Leader*

president (or designee) in each district was invited to all technical assistance meetings and played an active role on the steering committees. Two of the districts sought to place teachers with union leadership positions in chair or co-chair roles to ensure the union perspective was well represented on lever committees. As committee chairs, these teachers could monitor whether any proposed policy change conflicted with the teacher contract. One superintendent believed that the HR Pilot provided a platform to broaden union input in district decisions as union leaders were well positioned to solicit teacher support for resulting policy and practice changes under the levers in general and for the new educator evaluation system in particular.

Unlike providing support for less controversial changes, the unions' role in implementing the new educator evaluation system was vital. The unions were instrumental in communicating the mandate to teachers through their union representatives and in advocating for teachers' rights and interests. Furthermore, the unions and districts had to negotiate and come to agreement on the evaluation rubric before the districts could proceed with evaluating educators. Overall, the district-union relationship weathered the educator evaluation challenge successfully. For example, the district and union leaders in one district formed a joint committee to oversee educator evaluation implementation and to problem solve issues teachers raised as they tried out the new evaluation system (featured in the sidebar box below). In another district, union involvement and support for the new evaluation system appeared to be a key factor in facilitating teacher buy-in for the new system. A district leader commented, "We're way ahead of other districts vis-à-vis evaluation and our relationship with the union... Our teachers are enthusiastic [about the educator evaluation]."

**Joint Management Labor Task Force**

The district and union leaders in one district created a joint committee to oversee educator evaluation implementation districtwide. The committee had a broad base of stakeholder representatives, including district administrators, school leaders, teachers, caseload employees, and librarians. Meeting twice a month, the committee gathered feedback from designated teacher leaders in each school tasked with helping their colleagues' progress through the state-required evaluation cycle. The committee acted as a central forum where administrators and teachers could problem-solve together, address questions and dispel confusion about the evaluation process, and issue unified guidance to all educators in the district.

**Collaborative district-union relationships sustained despite leadership turnover.**

All three districts experienced turnover either in district or union leadership during HR Pilot implementation, with new leaders in two districts initially uncertain about whether fully implementing the local HR Pilot plans would support their respective agenda. To the extent that labor-management relationships often reflect the personal style and collaborative spirit of the specific leaders involved, the leadership turnover could have tested these relationships and possibly undermined ongoing HR Pilot implementation. WGEE helped to mitigate the impact of the turnovers and promoted continuing the HR Pilot as an active district initiative by serving as a resource to new leaders about the history of reform in the district and providing an outside viewpoint on district strengths and challenges. Overall, turnover did not appear to adversely impact sustainability of the HR Pilot as district and union leaders maintained their commitment to meet regularly to work through any implementation challenges.

# Communication and Buy-in

District change efforts demand clear communication with stakeholders to develop a shared understanding and engage staff in the reform (Dee, Henkin, & Duemer, 2003; Hollingsworth, 2012). Pursuing a communications strategy that effectively conveyed to stakeholders the purpose of the HR Pilot and important related changes was an ongoing district effort aided by the committee structures that offered broad-based participation.

**Broad-based participation sanctioned teacher input into district decisionmaking.**

The local committee structures established for the HR Pilot project created opportunities for districts to engage an expanded, albeit still limited, number of teachers into the districts' decisionmaking process. Initially, school staff and district administrators who served on committees actively participated in developing plans and recommending policy revisions or adoptions. As districts added more teachers to the lever committees, multiple representatives at each school became invested in the HR Pilot project and acted as messengers to and from other teachers in their schools.

As the HR Pilot progressed, district leaders realized the importance of creating broader educator buy-in and shared understanding about their local HR Pilot projects to garner teachers' support for any policy or practice changes resulting from the HR Pilot project. District leaders used a variety of communication strategies (e.g., newsletters to staff) to share information about the initiative districtwide. For example, one district leader developed a presentation and script for each principal to use at the year-end staff meeting. The presentation shared the accomplishments of each lever committee and placed the work in the larger context of overall district efforts to improve teaching expertise.

> "[Sharing information on subcommittees is important] to show how much 'say' teachers have in the decisionmaking process, which will increase our credibility, since it will show that teachers and administrators are presenting their ideas together."
>
> *-District Administrator*

**District efforts to communicate the work broadly remained a work in progress.**

Notwithstanding the broad participation on the lever committees, the majority of staff not directly involved in the HR Pilot still knew little about the purposes and goals of the initiative. In considering their respective communication strategies, district leaders struggled to determine the best time to share ongoing committee work. For example, one district representative reported a reluctance to roll out committee plans for changing district policies and practices until everyone involved clearly understood the implications and expected outcomes of HR Pilot work for the district. District leaders thus tended to limit widespread communication about the HR Pilot committees' efforts, and those who did not serve on committees did not link newly adopted or revised practices under one of the levers to the HR project. For example, many staff in one district expressed enthusiasm for the first district recruitment fair held in spring 2014, but did not associate it with the recruitment, hiring, and placement committee that spearheaded the fair. When staff were aware of changes to HR policies or practices, they had limited knowledge that committees with broad representation generated them. While it was not necessary to "brand" every change under the HR Pilot, the consequence of not knowing that broad-based educator participation generated the changes meant that stakeholders might have been less likely to value the changes, view them as legitimate, or understand the connections between and among the changes.

# Technical Assistance

WGEE served as the technical assistance provider to the three HR districts, providing a suite of supports including cross-district and district-specific assistance. The technical assistance providers offered three levels of customization: a) cross-district colloquia intended to inform district representatives of key HR Pilot implementation issues and provide time for cross-talk among the district; b) resources provided directly to districts to help them address implementation challenges; and c) a coherence coach to work with each district to facilitate the implementation process. The effectiveness of the technical assistance varied across activities and across district contexts.

**Districts generally valued WGEE-sponsored events and district-specific consulting.**

A significant component of the technical assistance of the grant was cross-district meetings. A team of 8 to 12 members from each district typically attended these meetings, held monthly during the school year and once annually as a summer institute. During the first year, each meeting focused on a specific lever and allowed districts to identify issues and plan changes for each lever. As the HR Pilot progressed, WGEE provided content experts on a variety of topics. Some of the colloquia topics (e.g., cultural proficiency, peer assistance) resonated with the districts, either because the speaker offered powerful insights or the topic fit with the next steps districts were ready to take in implementing specific strategies under the HR Pilot.

Separate cross-district meetings gathered together role-alike groups so that union leaders, district administrators, and school administrators could share strategies and challenges specific to their respective roles. District staff reported that cross-district meetings were generally useful for learning about how other HR Pilot districts were revising policies for specific levers, especially if another district had made more progress and could offer lessons learned. Nonetheless, when one district implemented changes on very different timelines from the others, these cross-district discussions became less applicable.

While most district feedback on colloquia events was positive, WGEE struggled to consistently design meetings that were well received by all participants. Some attendees noted that several presentations at WGEE-sponsored events were not helpful because the presenters did not clearly link the content to the issues the districts were facing. Moreover, participants often weighed the uncertain benefits against the significant time required to attend the meetings. In response to these concerns, WGEE sought additional input from districts on relevant topics and held shorter and more focused meetings. Thus, the technical assistance at the most general level was seen as useful, although the time spent away from the district versus the knowledge gained was a concern across districts.

> *"Working without other teams would not be as beneficial because we [districts] become very insular, and really see things only the way we want to see them. [It's] good to have this other lens of critical friends, and hear what they are doing to shape your own thought process. If not…it just becomes too tempting to do [things] the way [they were] always done."*
>
> *-District administrator*

In addition to these cross-district offerings, WGEE offered tailored technical assistance based on needs identified in annual planning meetings with the local HR Pilot leadership. For example, WGEE facilitated steering committee meetings, produced white papers that drew on the literature for a specific lever, brought in external experts to meet with lever committees, and provided executive coaching for district leaders. Districts generally viewed these efforts as more valuable because they were more tailored and applicable and in response to direct requests. For instance, for one district, the technical assistance provider developed five protocols of varying complexity for one steering committee to use to make evidence-based decisions about the proposals, and the district crafted its own protocol from the options provided.

**The effectiveness of coherence coaches' implementation support depended on district contexts.**

At the beginning of the HR Pilot, each district was assigned a coherence coach to meet the districts' specific needs during implementation. The coaches' responsibilities varied across districts and included providing support to the district leader, working directly with multiple lever committees, facilitating steering committee meetings, and attending the technical assistance sessions. Where the coherence coach was consistently involved, districts found them useful and were grateful for their hands-on help. In those cases, the district administrators in charge of lever committees acknowledged that their work was farther along because the coherence coach helped write the plans. They appreciated having a knowledgeable and capable coach who could keep the district's HR Pilot on target, for example, by consolidating plans based on subcommittee discussions when district leadership capacity to take on this kind of effort was thin.

Two key factors contributing to the usefulness of the technical assistance appeared to be the openness of the district to receiving it and the district's ability to identify a meaningful role for the coach. As coherence coaches provided the most customized technical assistance support, in the one district where it worked well, the coach functioned as a quasi-change agent. In the other two districts, the coach had a narrowly defined role and provided minimal support to the steering and lever committees. By narrowly defining the coach's role, those districts might have missed an opportunity to leverage reform expertise to support HR Pilot implementation.

# Chapter 5: Sustainability

It is too soon to tell if changes made under the HR Pilot initiative will be sustained in the three pilot districts. However, the literature suggests that certain indicators enhance the likelihood of sustaining a project beyond the term of outside support and funding. The indicators include committed and visionary leadership, local ownership of the project, formalization via structures and policies, and the availability of resources to support the changes (Copland, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Nardi & O'Day, 1999). This chapter examines the outlook for sustaining the policy and practice changes begun under the HR Pilot in terms of these indicators.

**District and union leaders made explicit commitments to sustain the work.**

Almost from the start of the initiative, district leaders demonstrated a commitment to continue their efforts to improve human resources policies and practices. This commitment increased the likelihood that the momentum would be sustained both in the face of leadership turnover and at the end of the funded period. As mentioned earlier in the report, two districts experienced turnover at the top level. As their departure became more certain, the two superintendents made a variety of decisions intended to sustain the work begun under their leadership. For example, they incorporated some aspects of the HR Pilot into the district strategic plan that district staff continued to implement. One superintendent shifted local HR Pilot leadership to an associate superintendent in fall 2012 and provided mentorship before leaving the district in spring 2013.

District leaders pursued additional strategies to sustain the changes related to the HR Pilot beyond the grant. For example, one superintendent successfully embedded citywide professional development in the 2014–15 school-year calendar in an effort to allocate time for professional development that would not require extending teachers' instructional year. As the grant period entered its final year, leaders in another district rebranded the lever and steering committees as a signal of the district's ongoing ownership over the process and commitment to distributed leadership and human capital development.

> *"We knew this is what we wanted to continue…. [We were] thinking about sustaining the work long before [we were] asked to think about sustainability."*
>
> *-District Administrator*

Commitment from union leadership was also critical to sustainability both because of the importance of facilitating formal commitments when required and because they serve as a bellwether of teacher perspectives. Maintaining cooperative relationships with the union and open communication is thus a priority going forward for each district. The superintendent in one district had a weekly meeting with the union president, which appeared prominently on her whiteboard schedule in her office. Less formal, but important to demonstrating unity, the superintendent and union president made several joint school

visits. All three districts included the union president on their steering committees, and in one district, district leaders and technical assistance providers worked closely with the union president to convey why proposed human resources changes would support teachers. In another district, the union leader displayed a willingness to explore alternative options (such as awarding professional development points in lieu of stipends) to compensate teachers serving on the committees, an essential structure for carrying out the local HR Pilot work.

**HR Pilot committee structures fostered ownership and sustainability.**

The local HR Pilot projects organized its work through steering committees and committees on each lever, as recommended by WGEE. Where these committees had high proportions of teachers, met consistently, and focused on analyzing problems and creating solutions related to the levers, the committee structure elevated and expanded teacher voice in districtwide decisions. During the initiative, 50 to 100 staff from each district were involved in some aspect of the HR Pilot project. Committee membership brought a broader representation of teacher perspectives into core district functions, such as professional development, teacher hiring, and induction.

The changes that district leaders made to the committee structures further recognized the importance of broadening the base of involvement in decisionmaking. For example, one district chose to add more teachers and decrease the number of administrators across committees, another district added specialists to the committee, and the third district increased representation across school levels. The committee structures were vital to implementation and remained an important component of the HR Pilot work even as the grant neared its end.

All three districts chose to continue their steering committees. One district leader stated that the steering committee had "transformed the way we think about solving big [districtwide] problems…the steering committee is now a place to get more input and more ideas generated to solve problems." Additionally, two districts strengthened the steering committee role going forward. One district underlined the significant role of the committee: "We do not make a decision from the central office that doesn't go through (the committee)." The district implemented term limits for committee members and developed policies to bring in educators with fresh perspectives. In another district, when their 2-year term expires, staff will assume a consultant role to the steering committee and remain involved in special projects. One leader noted that systematically changing the committee membership would allow the HR Pilot project to remain a "districtwide initiative, not a closed or elite membership." The steering committee structure was the channel for eliciting and conveying input from all stakeholders on the most important issues in instituting new human resources policies and practices.

The decision to maintain the steering committees and accord them a meaningful role in district decisionmaking may be the most promising legacy of the HR Pilot and its best hope for sustaining the work.

**Formalized and documented changes appeared more likely to endure.**

Districts took steps to formalize and codify new human resources policies and practices so they would be sustained. For example, the superintendent in one district documented and publicized the work of the committees to all district staff and even externally. Towards the end of the HR Pilot period, the district produced a brochure setting out its mission and vision that articulated, among other principles, teacher participation in decisionmaking. As a district administrator expressed, the brochure—initially designed as recruitment material for prospective teachers—was a statement of the district's identity for all staff to embrace and described the HR Pilot project for prospective teachers. In another district, the induction committee created a comprehensive induction plan to codify the new educator induction process, including a 3-year mentorship program. The district successfully implemented the comprehensive induction plan for all new educators, and the improvements to the induction process were well received at the school level. Moving forward, the district was in discussions regarding how to extend and improve the induction process for paraprofessionals and further differentiate between novice and experienced teachers that are new to the district.

**The educator evaluation system offers promise and challenge in sustaining the work.**

The supervision and evaluation lever differed from the others because it carried a clear goal: to lead efforts to implement the new educator evaluation system in the HR Pilot districts. Backed by a state mandate and strong accountability measures, the promise of the new evaluation system lies in its long-range cycle of continuous improvement in teaching, which naturally aligns with some HR Pilot levers. Where districts have integrated new educator evaluation implementation with other aspects of the HR Pilot, the set of HR reforms have a higher likelihood of sustaining. One district generally considered a state leader in educator evaluation implementation distributed components of educator evaluation implementation across all the lever committees. This kind of integration suggests that the evaluation component will reinforce the HR Pilot levers and that the whole movement is more likely to be sustained in the long term.

The challenge of implementing the new educator evaluation in the short term was that it contradicted the establishment of local ownership, which is a fundamental component of sustainability. Because the new educator evaluation is an outside and sometimes controversial mandate, districts struggled with building buy-in to the implementation process. The HR Pilot districts, perhaps using what they learned in implementing the other levers, took steps toward building that ownership. For example, in one district, the evaluation lever committee became known as the "Council on Educator Growth." This district recognized a need to "own" the HR Pilot and renamed the committees to tailor them to the district context. Two districts also created new positions for teacher leaders to support their colleagues in an effort to provide teachers with a trusted source to express questions or concerns about evaluation. All three districts created committees or task forces with broad stakeholder participation to oversee and smooth the educator evaluation implementation process. These implementation challenges are in tension with the potential to sustain the educator evaluation as an integral, locally owned component of integrated human resources policies aimed to improve teacher effectiveness.

**Scarce district resources threaten sustainability.**

The HR Pilot participants across all of the districts voiced concerns that momentum for continuing and sustaining the HR Pilot work will stall without continued outside funding support. Although these concerns are legitimate, it appears that the amount of funding involved is not especially large even for financially strapped urban districts. The districts were primarily concerned about the lack of future funding to support staff and staff time. In one district, committee members were paid a nominal stipend from project funds, another district utilized grant funds to cover educator release time to observe best practices in other classrooms, and the third district used the funds to release teachers for professional development. Districts also used grant funds to purchase materials for workshops/trainings, to cover subscription fees for programs and services resulting from lever committee recommendations, and to pay for outside experts to support the committees. As the project culminated, WGEE identified grant opportunities for two districts seeking to continue HR Pilot-related work.

Setting district budgets is not only a financial exercise but a process of setting district priorities. Although it may be difficult or impossible to fund more expensive initiatives (e.g., common planning time), district leaders seemed hopeful they could find funds to sustain the committees as the vehicle by which they can maintain their new participatory practices and the forum for continuing to find creative and inexpensive solutions to improvement.

Overall, findings from the HR Pilot implementation verify the importance of the sustainability indicators identified in the literature. One surprising finding, however, is the key role played by the committee structures both in empowering teachers and changing the relationship between the district administration and the teachers, perhaps permanently. The decision to continue the structural elements of the HR Pilot—and even strengthen the power of the committees—shows the impact and continued influence of the local HR Pilot on the ownership of improved teaching and learning in the districts.

# Chapter 6. Conclusions and Lessons Learned

This final chapter discusses the implications of the findings on HR Pilot implementation across the three districts and extracts key lessons from their experiences. It begins with revisiting the conceptual framework (Chapter 2) to highlight specific assumptions underlying the reforms that were critical for districts to successfully implement the HR Pilot locally.

A conceptual framework expresses the key explicit assumption that if "activities are conducted as planned with sufficient quality, intensity, and fidelity to plan, the desired results will be forthcoming" (Weiss, 1998, p. 58). However, the variation in quality, scope, and fidelity of implementation among the HR Pilot districts necessitates looking beyond the explicit assumptions of the HR Pilot to examine the underlying, implicit assumptions that contribute to the variation. These are the assumptions that, "although as important as those made explicit, remain implicit, unexplored, and inferred" (Weiss, 1995, p. 23).

We discuss some of the implicit assumptions underlying the HR Pilot conceptual framework, including assumptions about leadership, technical assistance, and the expectation that districts work on all seven levers. All these assumptions challenged districts' efforts to implement their local projects. For example, "strong and stable leadership" is a condition of success but fails to take into account that stable leadership, although vital, is not characteristic of urban districts and did not hold true in two HR Pilot districts that experienced superintendent turnover. Over the course of the HR Pilot, district and union leadership turnover across the districts impeded the progress to varying degrees. In each case, WGEE's concerted effort was necessary to educate the new leader about the HR Pilot's theory of action, reaffirm district and union leadership commitment to the project, and revise the implementation plan to take into account the leaders' priorities. In hindsight one district administrator observed, "We really struggled with HR Pilot because if you don't have stable leadership, HR Pilot is not the thing for you."

The second critical assumption is that the districts would and could take on seven levers at once. This assumption seems to touch the nonnegotiable core of the HR Pilot model, since the levers (and the alignment of the levers) differentiate the HR Pilot from other similar programs aspiring to improve human capital management. Two districts accepted the expectation to work on all the levers at once, although the leaders knew this decision would strain district capacity. One superintendent acknowledged wanting to prioritize four of the seven levers but was strongly encouraged to work on all seven simultaneously. Having then done so, the relationships between the levers became clearer to the district leaders: "If we had spent the first year focused on fewer (levers), it (the implementation process) might have been less fractured…. But now I am not sure how (that) would work as the seven committees are so intertwined."

Where districts attempted to address all seven levers, seven proved too many to work on with equal effort within the 2.5 years of implementation. Policy and practice changes most commonly took place under the recruitment and hiring, induction, professional development, and evaluation levers, the last motivated by the implementation of the state-mandated educator evaluation framework. Adult professional culture proved the most difficult to affect directly, perhaps not surprisingly lagging behind other changes until late in the implementation process.

Technical assistance comprised a major source of ongoing support for implementation, as reflected in the conceptual framework and as we discussed in Chapter 4. As the initiative was designed, the coherence coach offered assistance tailored to districts' needs and worked directly with the local steering committees and lever committees. Implicit to this technical assistance component were the assumptions that a) districts would accept an outsider as a key player in the project, and b) districts would know how to use the coach's assistance for optimal results. These assumptions did not bear out across all districts. One district started with a coherence coach the first year but between a lack of superintendent support and the district's preference for working with insiders to the system, the coach "met with a bad reception" according to interview respondents, left after the first year, and was not replaced. In a second district, the coherence coach limited her assistance to directly supporting the district administrators. With the arrival of the new superintendent, the coach's involvement basically ended. The third district experienced turnover in the position, which slowed their progress, according to the superintendent. Where the coherence coach was able to provide assistance valued by the district, the coach could identify hands-on activities to support particular committees that welcomed the coach's involvement or the district leaders shaped a niche role for the coherence coach, such as executive coaching for specific district administrators.

Not all the implicit assumptions had negative or limiting effects. For example, an explicit assumption was that "expanded educator participation in district decisionmaking" would be an outcome of the project, but the effect of that expanded participation on the district leadership is not included in the conceptual framework. In fact, two districts found that empowered teachers enriched the district with new sources of information and ideas for changing policy and practice. One assistant superintendent commented: "[It is my] sincere hope that this initiative will help us find a process by which we have shared decisionmaking between educators and administrators. Being more nimble and responsive to concerns will ultimately have better educational outcomes." The superintendent in another district mused: "If [we] go back to 5 years ago, the thinking of 60 people was done by 2 or 3 people. Through this reform, [the] change [is] almost natural. Let's turn it over to them [the teachers]."

Thus, expanded and more powerful teacher voice was a clear outcome of the HR Pilot work. This outcome arose in part from two other important HR Pilot accomplishments: engaging the support of district leadership in sharing decisionmaking beyond traditional district administrators; and using the broad-based committee structures to carry out HR Pilot-related work. The committee structures provided a channel for conveying diverse ideas to the district leaders, and shared leadership not only gave educators voice but gave them the opportunity to become catalysts for change. In the clearest examples of teacher

voice and ownership over aspects of the local HR Pilot projects, the committees generated the recommendations for modifying policies, such as streamlining the hiring process and increasing the differentiation of professional development to better meet teachers' unique needs. The developers often stated that if successful, the HR Pilot would change the way the districts "do business," meaning decisionmaking would be collaborative and decentralized.

The long view of the HR Pilot recognizes that significant district reform, both in terms of how teachers are supported throughout their careers and how the district makes decisions—true distributed leadership—takes time. Sustainability indicators suggest reasons for optimism in at least two districts. The legacy of the HR Pilot project in these districts is an opening up of norms around district consultation and decisionmaking, as well as a resulting ownership of district policies and practices among all educators, especially teachers. As important as these changes are, financial concerns hang over the districts about how to pay for teachers' time associated with this kind of involvement beyond their instructional duties.

It is from this holistic view of the HR Pilot that we pose some key lessons learned. While the lessons derive specifically from the successes and challenges of implementing human resources-related strategies, the HR Pilot was also an example of districtwide reform. Some of the lessons will therefore apply more broadly to a range of district reform strategies, particularly around the need for active district leadership to define the purpose and scope of the reforms, shared leadership that generates teachers' buy-in and engages them as change agents, and external assistance within the district's capacity to pursue the reforms. Moreover, the new educator evaluation system has as its central purpose improving teacher quality. To do so, districts may need to retool various HR functions to offer more coherent supports to new and experienced teachers. Thus, the HR Pilot districts' efforts to examine and reform those functions may be applicable to districts across Massachusetts.

## Lessons about Leadership

- The early stage of engaging district leaders in the reform theory and developing their understanding and concrete commitment to integrate the reforms into their district priorities is essential and must be thorough.
- District leadership turnover can paralyze reform activities, especially if the reform strategies do not have broad buy-in across district and school staff. Where such buy-in exists, key principles and practices representing the reforms can survive turnover.
- Union leadership turnover can be almost equally disruptive to reform efforts. Maintaining union support in the face of turnover requires persistent communication efforts and investment in explaining the reform theory of action, purposes, goals, and strategies to new union partners.

# Lessons about Successfully Implementing Complex Initiatives

- Policy reforms, even with broad-based participation and distributed leadership, take many years to institutionalize changes in practice. At the end of 2.5 years, the HR Pilot districts at best had made a few important changes in key priority levers and had begun to plan for sustainability. But the funded period did not afford sufficient time to for those practices to spread consistently at the school level.
- Districts, no matter how organized or ambitious, cannot tackle seven levers simultaneously and with equal results in a period of 2.5 years. District leadership must define priorities for the lever groups, provide encouragement to lagging or discouraged groups, and offer the reward of seeing hard work at the committee level bring change at the district level.
- Breaking down the silos that characterize typical district functions requires explicit effort, even to align activities that seem to fit naturally, such as using evaluation results to inform professional development offerings. While the emphasis in the HR Pilot initiative was on aligning the work of the lever committees, it is equally critical that district staff working in different functions have opportunities to interact routinely and make joint decisions.
- Training teacher leaders to help implement specific changes is a powerful strategy to achieve widespread implementation and buy-in. If chosen carefully, the teacher leaders have legitimacy among their colleagues, can reach the teaching force at scale, and provide distributed capacity to support implementation across schools.

# Lessons about Inherent Limitations of Technical Assistance

- The usefulness and effectiveness of technical assistance is a function of the district's readiness to receive technical assistance—for example the district having a rough set of plans with target goals, dates, and actions that can be used to identify an appropriate role for the technical assistance provider. These plans help define the capacity the district needs to implement the reforms, as well as the high-value functions to which the technical assistance provider can contribute.
- Ultimately, the role of external technical assistance is limited to providing needed capacity (such as needed extra help in planning and organizing, knowledge on specific topics, and access to resources or other experts), maintaining and monitoring a work plan or timeline, and encouraging or even cajoling those in the district who are supposed to take action. External technical assistance providers cannot supply the motivation or rationale for seeing through the project, establish the project as a district priority, or devote leadership attention to it. Those essentials must come from the district.

# Lessons about Teacher Voice

- Teacher voice and union representation are not the same thing. Union representation is often governed by provisions in the collective agreement and offers a formal or official viewpoint intended to convey a unified position across the membership. True teacher voice gives a broad range of individual teachers direct access to district discussion and decisionmaking, recognizes the myriad differences among teachers (assignments, training, school culture, knowledge, skills, etc.), and treats variation and nuances among teacher perceptions as important considerations in policy and organizational changes.
- Effectively giving teachers a voice in decisionmaking needs to be explicit in structures, processes, and policies. Those structures, processes, and policies become the mechanism for hearing teachers' voices. Examples of joint decisionmaking include numerous representation and leadership on committees (not a single or token teacher representative), policies on committee membership rotation to maximize teacher participation over time, teachers being visible owners of the work (e.g., presenting committee plans to executives), joint taskforces of administrators and teachers guiding the implementation of key initiatives, and teacher leaders on the front lines helping colleagues through challenging initiatives and bringing teacher feedback to a joint taskforce.

The HR Pilot initiative was implemented in very few districts in a very short time span. It is easy to get lost in the specific stories of successes and lapses of the local projects in individual districts. However, the overarching lesson of the HR Pilot initiative is a powerful message for other districts in Massachusetts as they embark on districtwide change. If district administrators are willing to share leadership, create specific channels for including educators at all levels in the decisionmaking process and then act on the input they receive, they will have taken a powerful step towards building broad-based ownership and support that will make change more palatable, easier, and likely more successful.

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