



CALL/ECL

Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership Learning/
Equity-Centered Leadership

The Role of Partnerships in Supporting Equity-Centered School Leadership

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In collaboration with Joshua Childs

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Acknowledgments

This work would not be possible without the support of our research team. We would specifically like to thank John Diamond and Wehmah Johnes, who guided our exploration of the qualitative data. We also appreciate the support of graduate student researchers at National Taipei University, Taiwan, who analyzed the social network data.

Most importantly, we would like to thank all our research partners — district leaders, community leaders, and representatives of state education agencies and of higher education institutions — for their generosity in sharing their work and insights with us.

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Suggested Citation: Molle, D., Halverson, R., Probst, C., Liou, Y., Mosby, J., Acosta, J., & Guan, X. (2026). *The Role of Partnerships in Supporting Equity-Centered School Leadership*. <https://doi.org/10.59656/EL-LS5116.001>

Published October 2026

For more information: <https://call-ecl.wcer.wisc.edu/>

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Executive Summary

Partnerships are central to district change efforts because they build on the complementary strengths, knowledge, and expertise of multiple organizations, creating richer learning opportunities and more responsive initiatives. At the same time, cross-organizational partnerships are not easy to establish, nurture, and sustain (Akkerman & Bruinig, 2016). This is particularly true when partnerships are focused on advancing equity in schools. Equity-focused work often comes up against structures and regulations that perpetuate inequities (Diamond & Gomez, 2023), and requires time, trust, and personal investment (Valdez et al., 2020).

This report investigates partnerships focused on promoting school leadership for equity. We explore the development of partnerships between districts and three other types of organizations: **state education agencies**, **community-based organizations**, and **universities**. The report draws on data collected over four years (2021–2025) with districts participating in the Equity-Centered Pipeline Initiative (ECPI). The initiative launched in 2021 and is funded by The Wallace Foundation. The main goal of the initiative is to support districts in designing “comprehensive and aligned” (Gates et al., 2019) pathways for equity-centered school leaders. The initiative includes eight large urban districts in the US.

The purpose of the report is to illustrate how districts and their external partners worked together to embed equity in leadership pathways and make these pathways more coherent, transparent, and robust. More specifically, we describe how the partners engaged with one another and how the partnerships

developed over time. We provide a typology for each partnership that is not evaluative but intended to capture the variation we documented. We use our research insights to offer lessons learned for sustaining partnerships over time.

District-state partnerships

We identified three kinds of engagement between districts and state education agencies: relational, operational, and collaborative. *Relational* partnerships consisted primarily of sharing information. In *operational* partnerships, state agencies provided specific services to the districts, such as technical assistance and professional learning for leaders. *Collaborative* partnerships describe relationships where state education agencies and districts co-designed tools to support the implementation of state leader standards.

The partnerships developed differently over time. In half of the districts, the collaboration between the district and the state agency strengthened over the four years of data collection, while in the remaining districts it diminished. This finding speaks to the vulnerability of the partnerships to staff turnover and restructuring at the state level.

We found that district-state partnerships challenged the traditional view of the state agency as an organization concerned primarily with oversight and accountability. The partnerships were beneficial both to the district and the state, enabling the state agency to pilot programs and better understand the impact of state policy.



District-community partnerships

A key finding from our analysis of district-community partnerships was that “community” in our data referred to two distinct entities: community-based organizations and community members. In response to this insight, we developed a typology that captures both groups. *Relational* partnerships enabled districts to leverage the social relationships of community-based organizations, and learn from various stakeholder groups about the needs of students and families. In *operational* partnerships, community-based organizations provided specific services that expanded the districts’ capacity to meet the needs of their communities. By contrast, *collaborative* partnerships enabled district leaders to integrate the perspectives of community members into internal routines (such as the hiring of new school leaders).

Our analysis indicates that partnerships with community-based organizations were difficult to sustain over the first four years of the initiative, most likely because these organizations did not focus directly on school leadership. Instead, they provided services that sought to meet the needs of students, families, and educators through intensive tutoring, language translation, and emergency licensure assistance, among other activities. Nevertheless, several districts in our study successfully engaged community *members* in leadership pathways (e.g., through community hiring panels). We recommend that districts consider partnerships with community-based organizations separately from the integration of community voices in district practices. Both have important, albeit distinct, roles to play in

increasing districts’ capacity to design leadership pathways that are responsive to community needs.

District-university partnerships

The district-university partnerships in our data focused on providing high quality, equity-focused programming to aspiring and/or current school leaders. We identified three types of engagement: responsive, tailored, and co-designed. In *responsive* partnerships, universities made small changes to their existing programming. *Tailored* partnerships describe instances when the university partners made substantive adaptations to existing programming to address district equity priorities. *Co-designed* partnerships also saw substantive changes to the universities’ existing programming, but included sustained collaboration with the district around program redesign and delivery.

A key insight from our analysis of district-university partnerships is the distinction between collaboration and co-design. Close collaboration occurred in all three kinds of district-university partnerships. Some university partners asked district leaders for guidance and feedback on their programming, while others engaged district leaders as co-designers. The distinction between collaboration and co-design sheds light on the range of roles that partners can play in a partnership that they experience as collaborative.

Key Recommendations

While partnerships are central to expanding districts' capacity to engage in equity-focused work, they can be difficult to establish and grow. Below, we provide a list of key recommendations for sustaining each type of partnership.



1. District-state partnerships

- a. Recognize the mutually beneficial nature of partnerships between districts and state education agencies:** Most districts and state agencies in our study did not have a history of working together before the ECPI. Our insights make an argument for expanding the state's relationship with districts from oversight to collaboration.
- b. Establishing clear expectations and role definitions strengthens partnerships:** We recommend that states and districts begin their partnership by establishing a partnership framework that highlights complementary expertise, defines the roles of each partner, and is regularly revisited and revised.



2. District-community partnerships

- a. Integrate more practices valued by community members into district routines:** District partnership with community partners can be strengthened if district leaders purposefully integrate practices valued by community-based organizations into district routines, such as the design of leader portraits, principal hiring, and leader professional learning.
- b. Give community partners a meaningful seat at the table:** Before inviting community partners to the table, we recommend that district leaders ask about their goals, and the roles that the community partners would like to play in district decision-making.
- c. Position representatives of community-based organizations as leaders in schools:** Closer partnerships occurred when community-based organizations were better informed about district priorities and were given opportunities to further those priorities through their engagement with students, families, and staff.



3. District-university partnerships

- a. Engaging in a formative, equity-focused self-assessment contributes to program change:** Going through a rigorous, equity-focused self-assessment process motivated program redesign even for universities that had recently revised their programming. It also provided opportunities for collaboration between district leaders and university faculty/staff.
- b. Long-term collaboration requires infrastructure:** Regular (typically monthly) team meetings provided opportunities to build relationships, co-construct work, and maintain open communication between partners.
- c. University partners can provide support to in-service, as well as pre-service leaders:** While most district-university partnerships in the ECPI focused on preservice principal preparation, some collaborations provided much needed support to current leaders.

Introduction

Large urban school districts face persistent inequities that are deeply embedded in historical, political, and organizational structures. In response, districts have increasingly turned to partnerships to coordinate strategies, expand learning capacity, and pursue system-level change (Goldstein et al., 2025).

Partnerships between school systems and external organizations help districts access necessary knowledge and expertise. At the same time, such partnerships are not easy to establish and sustain (Akkerman & Bruinig 2016). This is particularly true when partnerships are focused on advancing equity in schools. Equity-focused work comes up against structures that perpetuate inequities (Diamond & Gomez, 2023), and requires time, trust, and personal investment (Valdez et al., 2020).

This report investigates partnerships focused on promoting school leadership for equity. We explore the development of partnerships between school districts and three other types of organizations: state education agencies, community-based organizations, and universities. The report draws on data collected from 2021 to 2025 with districts participating in the Equity-Centered Pipeline Initiative (ECPI). The ECPI is a six-year initiative that launched in 2021 and involves eight large urban districts in the United States. It is funded by The Wallace Foundation. The main goal of the ECPI is to support districts in designing “comprehensive and aligned” (Gates et al., 2019) pathways for equity-centered school leaders.

The insights we describe are based on data collected over the span of four years across all eight ECPI districts. This data include interviews with district leaders and their partners,

documents crafted by district leaders and submitted to The Wallace Foundation (such as logic models, workplans, and progress reports), and meeting notes from monthly district-level ECPI meetings and biannual ECPI convenings. In addition, we used a social network survey to collect data on the nature of collaboration across individuals involved in the ECPI. The purpose of the survey was to measure the extent of partnership efforts and the flow of information, resources, and support. We administered the survey annually.

This report provides practical, evidence-based insights for district leaders, policymakers, and researchers seeking to build and sustain partnerships that expand districts’ capacity to advance equity in schools. We illustrate how districts and their external partners worked together to embed equity in leadership pathways and make these pathways more coherent, transparent, and robust. More specifically, we describe how the partners engaged with one another and how the partnerships developed over time. We provide a typology for each partnership that is not evaluative but intended to capture the variation we documented. We use our research insights to offer lessons learned for sustaining partnerships over time.

The Equity-Centered Pipeline Initiative Context

The ECPI was launched to help large urban districts redesign leadership development systems with an explicit focus on advancing equity. Over the past decade, research and policy interest in school leadership has increasingly focused on the role districts play in developing and sustaining effective principal pathways. Research has shown that districts that take a coordinated approach to leadership standards, preparation,

FIGURE 1**The Principal Pipeline Initiative Model**

hiring, support, and evaluation can improve principal effectiveness and student outcomes (Gates et. al., 2019; Grissom et al., 2021).

ECPI is a multi-year improvement initiative involving eight districts across the US. The initiative seeks to support districts in strengthening how school leaders are recruited, prepared, hired, supported, evaluated, and retained, with the goal of improving teaching and learning conditions for students historically underserved by schools. The ECPI encourages districts to design locally responsive leadership pathways at multiple levels to align organizational routines, professional learning structures, and accountability mechanisms around equity-centered improvement priorities (see Figure 1).

A central premise of ECPI is that districts' efforts to redesign leadership pathways can be strengthened through deep partnerships with internal and external stakeholders. The ECPI positions districts not as isolated actors but as part of an ecosystem that includes state education agencies, community-based organizations, and institutions of higher education. This approach is grounded in research, which has illustrated that state education agencies (Woo et al., 2025), and community-based organizations (Klevan et al., 2023), and universities (e.g., Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022), can expand districts' capacity to meet the needs of every student.

At the beginning of the ECPI, districts were asked to form district partnership teams (DPTs). The teams included district leaders and representatives from a state education agency, a community-based organization, and two higher education institutions. The size of the partnership teams varied across districts, but tended to include a core of about ten members. The activity of the partnership teams was facilitated by a district staff member. The work of the team was supported by Wallace Foundation staff, technical assistance providers, and research partners.

This report was written by researchers at the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning/Equity-Centered Leadership (CALL-ECL) project. The project was funded by The Wallace Foundation to make the equity-focused efforts of the ECPI districts accessible to the larger field of educational leadership. The CALL-ECL team partnered with the eight ECPI districts to document how they designed and implemented equity-centered leadership pathways. Researchers from the team met regularly with district leaders, and attended district meetings where the systems work related to the initiative was planned and discussed. CALL-ECL researchers also participated in initiative-wide events that supported cross-district sharing and learning.

District Partnerships

District partnerships have become a central feature of contemporary education reform because cross-organizational collaboration can mobilize complementary forms of knowledge, resources, and legitimacy through joint work on shared problems. However, research across organizational fields suggests that partnerships are inherently difficult to build and sustain (Akkerman & Bruinig 2016). Differences in institutional timelines, incentives, accountability pressures, and professional norms can make collaboration fragile even when partners share broad commitments to reform (Thomson & Perry, 2006). Successful partnerships typically require deliberate governance, role clarity, and sustained interpersonal work to produce real change (Penuel et al., 2015).

A broad interdisciplinary literature helps explain how partnerships can function as organizational resources for change. Organizations work together to secure critical resources and reduce uncertainty (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Theories of shared governance show how partnerships often provide shared decision-making spaces where public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community stakeholders can jointly define problems and coordinate action (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Studies of network governance describe how collaborations that balance efficiency, inclusiveness, and legitimacy can support multiple organizations working toward shared goals (Provan & Kenis, 2008). In sum, successful partnerships enable organizations to align resources and missions to advance complex work.

In education, the role of partnerships in district reform is explored in research-practice partnerships and networked improvement studies. Coburn and Penuel (2016), for example, describe research-practice partnerships as collaborations organized around shared problems of practice and oriented toward mutual learning and outcomes valued by each partner. Effective partnerships develop shared problem definitions, create routines for evidence use, and build interpersonal trust that supports adaptation over time (Farrell et al., 2021). Improvement science research makes the case that partnerships designed around shared goals and data generation can accelerate coordinated change strategies across diverse contexts while maintaining focus around shared goals (Bryk et al., 2015). These kinds of partnerships function as infrastructures for knowledge generation and organizational learning.

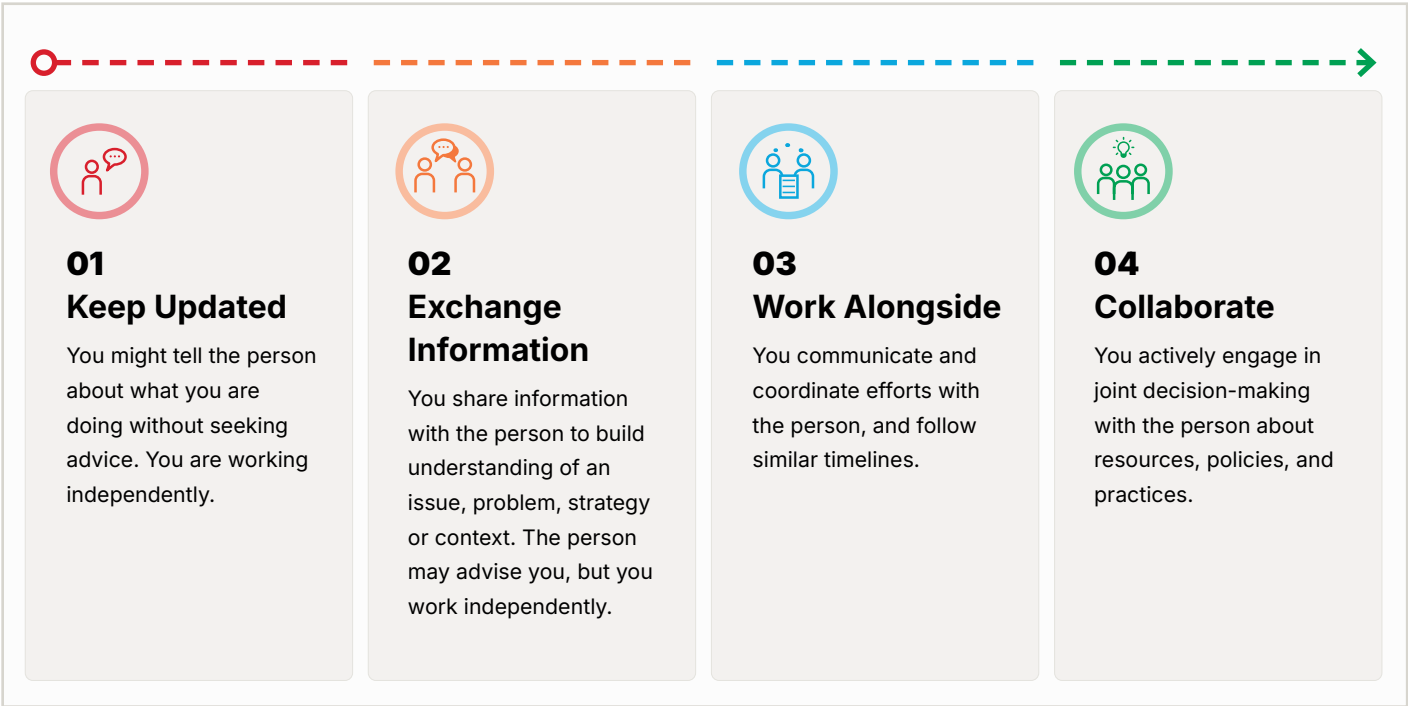
Principal pathway design is a complex enterprise that calls for the development of these kinds of designed partnerships with states, local communities, and higher education institutions.

- *State agencies* contribute regulatory authority and influence over licensure systems, leadership standards, and accountability expectations (CCSSO, 2015);
- *Community-based organizations* contribute locally grounded knowledge about histories of marginalization, cultural assets, and community aspirations that are central to equity-centered leadership development (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016);
- *Higher education institutions* can integrate district priorities into licensure and credentialing programs (Honig & Coburn, 2008), provide high quality professional learning opportunities for sitting leaders (Player & Katz, 2016), and develop the capacity of central office staff (Rainey & Honig, 2015).

District partnerships are difficult to develop and sustain for a number of reasons. Role ambiguity, identity negotiation, and uneven distributions of power can undermine shared decision-making and limit the depth of collaboration (Farrell et al., 2019). Organizational partnerships may privilege some perspectives over others, particularly in equity-focused initiatives designed to challenge established routines and hierarchies (Gray et al., 2022). Sustaining partnerships in such contexts depends on the development of governance structures and routines that allow partners to coordinate action while maintaining a commitment to long-term goals (Turnbull et al., 2022).

This report draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected from 2021 to 2025. (A complete list of data sources is provided in the appendix.) The qualitative evidence includes: (a) meeting notes from monthly ECPI-focused meetings in each of the eight districts, biannual initiative convenings, and annual reporting events facilitated by The Wallace Foundation; (b) two rounds of semi-structured interviews with state, community, and university partners and one round of interviews with district leaders; (c) documents written by the districts and submitted to The Wallace Foundation, such as progress reports, workplans, and logic models; and (d) syllabi and program materials shared with the researchers by university partners. These data sources were used to trace how districts leveraged partnerships in the design and implementation of leadership pathways.

FIGURE 2
The four-point scale used in the social network survey



The quantitative component of the study consists of four annual waves of a social network analysis (SNA) survey. The survey captured patterns of collaboration, advice seeking, and influence among individuals involved in leadership pathway design and implementation. The instrument included 14 items aligned to the principal pipeline domains of leader standards, preparation, hiring and placement, evaluation, support, supervision, data use, and sustainability (see Figure 1). Respondents were asked to identify individuals and organizations they interacted with around specific leadership system tasks. The survey also asked respondents to describe the nature of the interaction using a four-point scale (see Figure 2). We used the data to analyze patterns of collaboration across partners over time.

To organize the variation we observed in the qualitative data, we crafted typologies for each kind of partnership (district-state, district-community, and district-university). The typologies were developed inductively based on the evidence we had collected. Simultaneously and independently, we analyzed the quantitative data from the social network survey. We used the survey data to understand the scope and emergence of the partnerships over time. We brought

the qualitative and quantitative analyses together to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and development of the partnerships. This is a convergent design model that is often used in mixed-methods research (Creswell & Clark, 2026). We used the insights from the combined analyses to craft key recommendations for strengthening and sustaining each type of partnership.

In the sections that follow, we discuss each type of partnership in turn. We first present our typology of the partnership, which is intended to reflect the variation we observed without framing one partnership as inherently better than another. We then discuss relevant findings from the social network analysis. We conclude each section with a list of recommendations and a summary.

District Partnerships with State Education Agencies

The ECPI deliberately sought to reposition state agencies from primarily oversight-oriented actors to active partners in districts' leadership redesign efforts. State education agencies occupy a consequential but often indirect position in district leadership reform. Traditionally, states influence district systems through regulatory levers such as licensure requirements, leadership standards, data reporting expectations, and accountability frameworks (Gates et al., 2022). These functions shape the conditions under which districts develop and support school leaders. Prior research suggests that state-district partnerships grounded in shared goals, mutual trust, and sustained co-design remain relatively rare (Manna, 2022; Proger et al., 2017).

In the section that follows, we offer a typology of state-district partnerships that represents the range of relationships we encountered in our data. The ECPI positioned state education agencies as *partners* in districts' improvement efforts, and we describe the range of ways state agencies engaged with districts across the ECPI network to illustrate how this partnership role was enacted in practice. Insights from the social network data are presented later in the section as complementary descriptive evidence about the development of these partnerships.

Typology of State Partnerships

We identified three distinct collaboration types in our data: *relational*, *operational* and *collaborative* (see Table 1). These categories are not mutually exclusive, which means that a specific state-district partnership can include engagement of more than one type (e.g., *relational and operational*). The typology captures the variation in collaboration we observed in our data, and adds depth to the field's emerging understanding of district-state partnerships.

Relational Partnerships

As Table 1 illustrates, all participating districts engaged in the *relational* type of collaboration. This type of partnership was structured as regular opportunities to meet and discuss ideas. Both district and state leaders valued the opportunity to get to know one another by participating in regular partnership team meetings. District leaders used terms such as “collaborator” and “sounding board” to describe the relationship with the state agency.

Initially, many interactions in this type of partnership focused on district compliance with state policies. As one state partner explained, “Our role that we agreed to as a state agency was more so to provide guardrails to make sure that [the district was] within the confines of what the state ... says” (November

TABLE 1**Typology of state-district partnerships**

Relational (n=7)	Operational (n=6)	Collaborative (n=2)
The district and the state <i>share information</i> about the tools, strategies, and resources that the district can use to strengthen leadership for equity.	The state partner <i>provides specific services</i> , such as technical assistance and professional learning for aspiring and current school leaders.	The state partner engages in <i>collaborative design</i> with the district related to leader standards and their implementation.
Examples		
Partners in this type reported “having meaningful, gainful conversations that [were] still in that framework of equity and equitable leadership.” The state partner served as “a sounding board,” and district leaders appreciated that the partnership with the state agency “brought us back to making sure we’re centering teaching and learning in our conversations of racial equity.”	State agencies provided professional learning opportunities for principals and aspiring principals, and helped form groups of districts that worked together with a shared focus. Some state agencies provided technical assistance related to teacher and principal evaluation. State agencies also supported the district by sharing relevant data.	One state agency collaborated with the district to develop a rubric of effective school leadership anchored in the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership. Another agency was part of the design team for the district’s equity-centered leader dispositions, and collaborated with the district and its university partners to design professional learning based on the PSEL standards.

Note: The total number of districts in this analysis is 7. We excluded District of Columbia Public Schools because of its unique legal standing and relationship with its state agency, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

11, 2024). In other instances, however, discussions centered on how the state could support the district’s equity-focused work. Some state leaders provided input on the development of a district’s equity-centered leadership framework. The engagement of state agency representatives during partnership team meetings enabled districts to learn about state-level initiatives, credentialing processes, and available financial resources (e.g., grants). In sum, the presence of the state agency at the partnership meetings gave state leaders opportunities to develop a relationship that could support the district in interpreting state policy, share knowledge with the district, and connect the district to resources.

Operational Partnerships

The second type of partnership between the district and the state agency was *operational*. An operational partnership was

a transactional arrangement where the state provided a certain service for the district to support district leader pathways. One state partner, for example, set aside funds to support the ECPI work: “We’re having some additional conversations to reallocate [funds] to provide additional technical support for principals, supervisors, or however else the [district] may need technical assistance” (August 30, 2022). Most state partners provided professional learning opportunities for district leaders, and sitting and/or aspiring school leaders: “We have a central office inclusive leadership professional development series that we have developed statewide. We have adapted it to [our partner district] and they are receiving that professional development this year” (November 5, 2024). Such learning opportunities were typically free and available to districts across the state. The relational partnerships established through the district partnership team meetings helped the state



promote these learning opportunities with districts. In addition to professional learning for leaders, some states supported districts' development of data systems to track and support leadership recruitment, placement, and hiring by providing financial support and sharing data that could be integrated directly into district data resources.

Collaborative Partnerships

A type of partnership that involved co-design was the *collaborative* partnership. Collaborative partnerships involved the joint design of resources that could support equity-centered leadership development. We observed two examples of this type of partnership. In the first instance, a state agency led the development of a crosswalk between the state leadership standards and the district leadership framework. The state established a workgroup that included both state and district leaders. The outcome of this partnership was a rubric that the district shared with principal mentors and coaches to guide the support they provide to school leaders. The second example involved the collaborative design of principal learning modules that were intended for use by the district's principal coaches. As the state partner explained, “[We] had a collaborative group of stakeholders who redesigned [the modules]. Our university partners in the ECPI were a part of the work as well. We worked with [the district] team and their principal coaches. And [the district ECPI leaders] were there. And then my staff were there ... and we’ve been working on

calibrating our understanding of the [PSEL] standards and what they call for” (September 9, 2022). The learning modules were aligned to the district's portrait of an equity-centered leader.

These two examples illustrate how state policy levers, such as leader standards and learning opportunities, could serve as a foundation for collaborative design work between state education agencies and school districts.

Insights from the Social Network Analysis

The social network data offer valuable insights into the nature of partnerships and partnership development over time. These data corroborate the pattern we see in the qualitative typology: most district-state partnerships involved sharing information rather than joint work.

Most partnerships focused on information-sharing

We can shed light on the nature of state-district partnerships because our survey instrument included a four-point scale to measure the depth of the interactions (see Figure 2). The data analysis suggests that the first two categories (keep updated and exchange information) reflect information-sharing relationships, while the latter two (work alongside and collaborate) represent joint work.

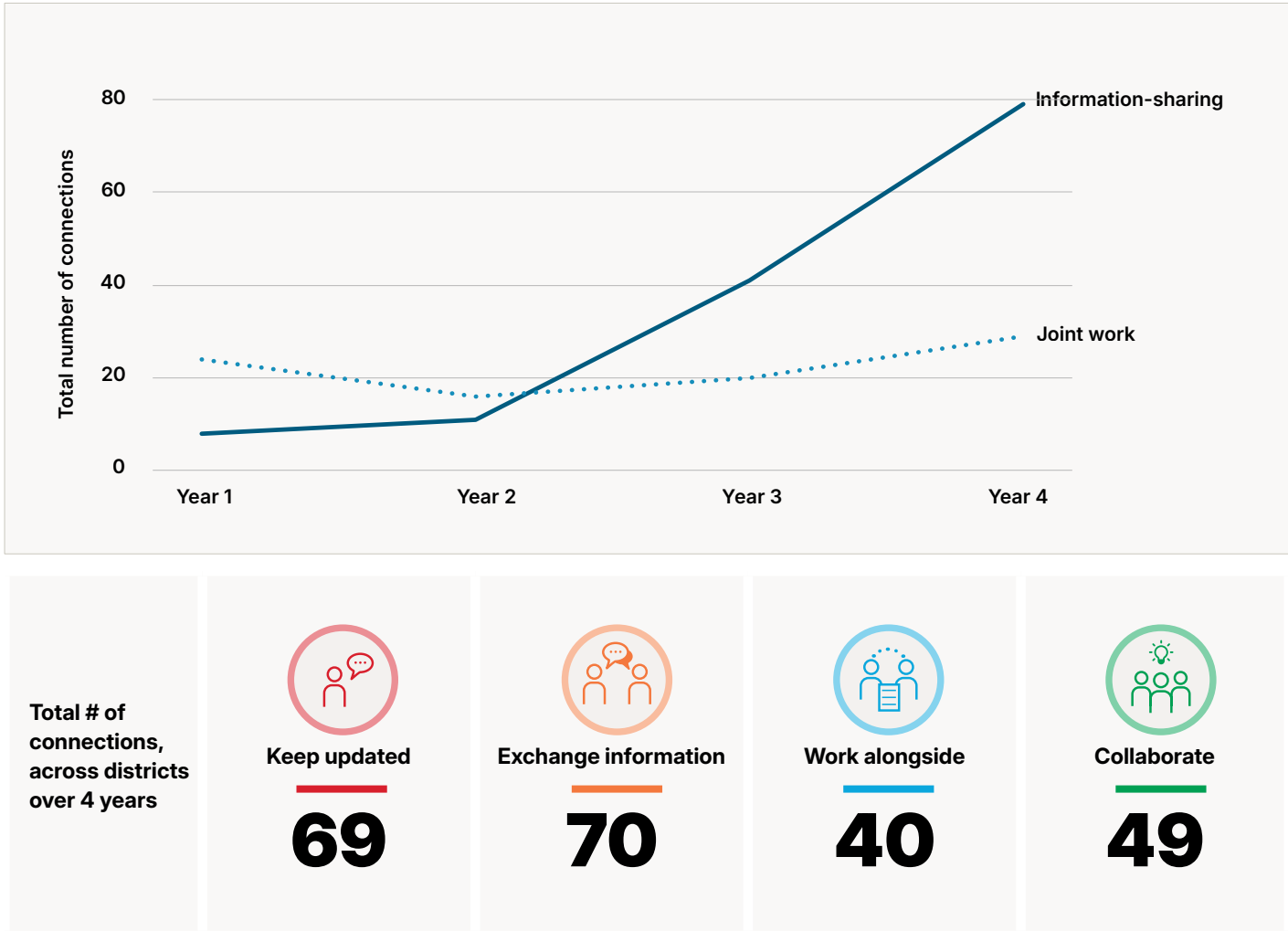
The information-sharing levels of the scale correspond to the *relational* and *operational* categories in our partnership typology. Our qualitative analysis indicates that most of the partnership activities between states and districts fell into these two categories (see Table 1). The social network confirms this pattern. As Figure 3 illustrates, information-sharing connections (solid line) represented the majority of ties between district and state leaders, and the number of such connections increased substantively in Year 4.

This finding is not surprising given how unusual it is for state-district partnerships to involve joint work. One way to promote such partnerships is to recognize and promote their potential to be mutually beneficial in advancing each organization's equity goals. We discuss this point further in the following section.

Partnerships evolved in dissimilar ways

The social network data helps us map not only the nature of collaboration but also how partnerships evolved. To better understand district-state partnership, we analyzed the number of collaborators that state partners reported over time. These data helped us recognize that state-district partnerships followed different trajectories across the eight district partnership teams (see Figure 4). In four DPTs, the number of state partner collaborators increased over time, and this increase was quite substantial in 3 out of the 4 cases (Figure 4a). In three DPTs, the number of collaborators for the state partner dropped considerably in Year 4, in two cases to zero (Figure 4b). This drop coincided with restructuring or staff turnover at the state agency.

FIGURE 3
Total number of connections between state education agencies and ECPI districts, by year and level of intensity



The social network analysis illustrates that it was difficult to establish and sustain strong partnerships between state agencies and districts across the ECPI. As we discuss below, these relationships seemed to be dependent on interpersonal connections and did not yet represent cross-agency collaboration.

The vulnerability of district-state joint work

The survey data provides important context for the partnerships that we classify as *collaborative*. The two districts that engaged their state partners in collaborative design had one distinguishing characteristic: they reported a greater share of joint work collaboration ties than information-sharing collaboration ties (see Table 2). The two districts did not stand out in terms of the total number of connections with the state

partner. This finding suggests that what distinguished these partnerships was not the *number* of connections between the state and the district, but the *kinds* of joint work those ties reflected.

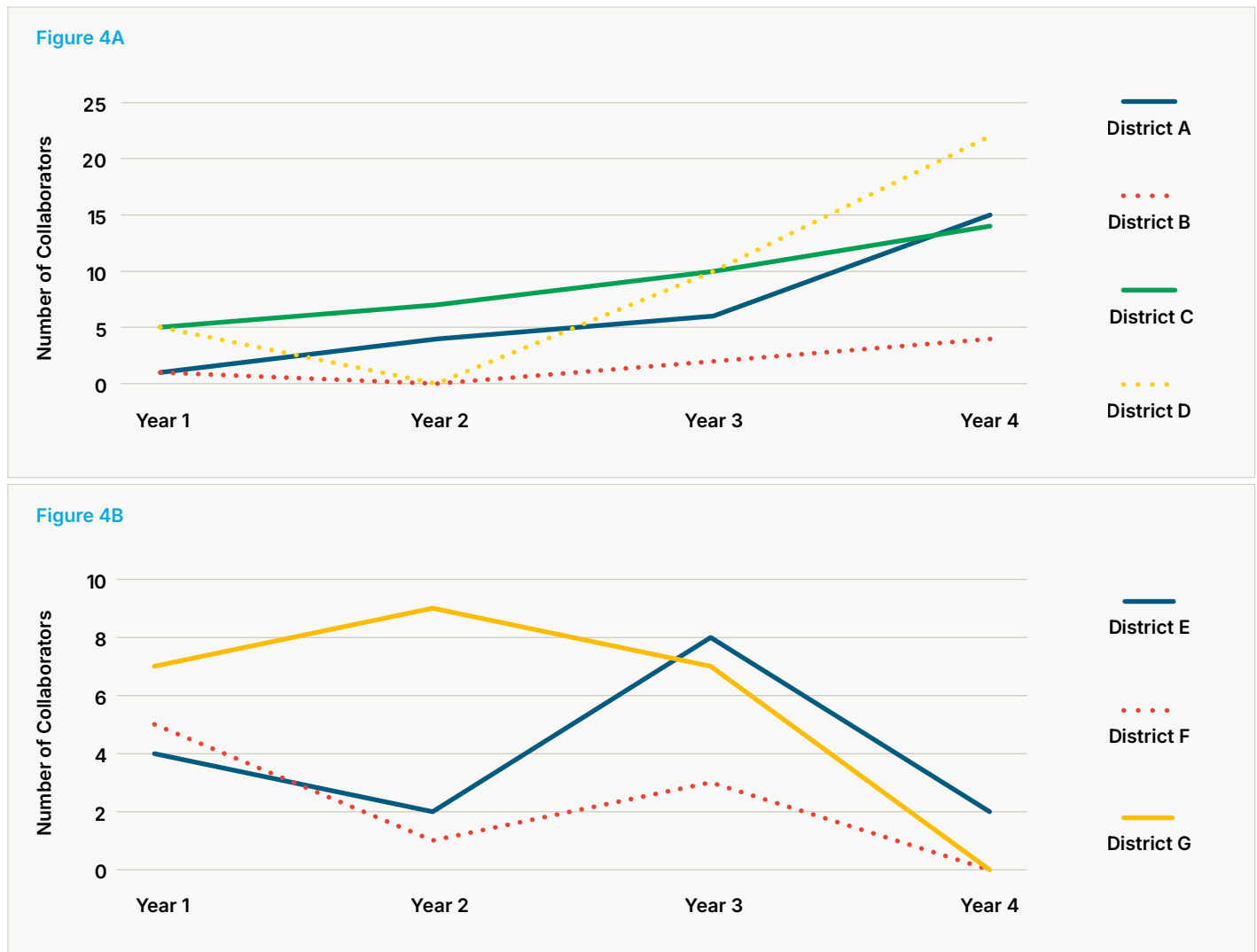
TABLE 2

Total number of information-sharing and joint work connections in the two districts that engaged in collaborative partnerships

District	Information-sharing ties	Joint work ties
District F	4	5
District G	7	24

FIGURE 4

Number of state partner collaborators within each district partnership team



Despite the presence of collaborative design, turnover among the partners at the state level jeopardized collaboration with the district. Both districts that engaged their state partner in co-design reported no ties to state education agencies in Year 4, showing that even high-quality design work is contingent on relationships between specific individuals. This finding points to a difference between individual and organizational collaboration, and speaks to the need for partners to plan for sustainability from the very beginning of the partnership.

Lessons from State/District ECPI Partnerships

Recognizing the mutually beneficial nature of state-district partnership

The mutual benefits of collaboration may not be obvious to partners that have no history of working together. Our data suggests, however, that such benefits are numerous and mutual. Most districts benefitted from the partnership by expanding their access to financial and learning resources provided by the state, and leveraging the expertise of the state partner.

State education agencies benefitted from the partnerships as well. State agency representatives and district leaders highlighted several ways in which state-district partnerships bolstered the work of the state agency:

- The partnership helped a state agency better understand the on-the-ground impact of state policy, including how it was affecting principal preparation programs.
- Two ECPI districts were sites where the state agency piloted new programs or initiatives.
- The partnership with the district helped several state agencies expand access to the professional learning resources made available state-wide.
- The partnership facilitated learning by the state agency, and supported the development of tools that the state could then share with other districts, such as professional learning modules for school leaders.

The different types of state-district partnerships we describe provide a useful way of thinking about how to strengthen existing partnerships. Many districts participate in meetings to hear about new state-level guidelines or requirements. Even though these are typically one-direction relational meetings (from states to districts), they can provide the necessary

familiarity to support district knowledge of the breadth of operational services provided by the state. District leaders can follow up with state leaders to pursue a wider range of operational partnerships.

Collaborative partnerships, however, are likely to be more rare because they push against the traditional role of the state agency. In addition, state leaders are responsible for supporting all districts in their state and may have limited capacity to engage in co-design work with one district only (even if that district is the largest in the state). Recognizing the mutually beneficial nature of district-state partnerships may enable state agencies to be strategic in how they partner with districts, and identify areas in which joint work partnerships help meet state as well as district priorities. Connecting such partnerships explicitly to key state priorities may help the partnerships survive staff turnover and reorganization at the state level.

Establishing clear expectations and role definitions strengthens partnerships

Our data point to a number of challenges that states and districts encountered when working together. State partners named unclear expectations and uncertainty about how to engage as hurdles to the deepening of partnerships. One state agency representative described this challenge in the following terms:

*“One of the things that’s problematic in this is that as the state, we’re writing a letter of support to the districts. The expectation of the state in this regard is pretty loosely defined. ... We want all of our districts to get these wonderful grants and do this wonderful work. But I don’t think it’s as clear to the SEA what this is going to entail, the level of commitment and resource that this is going to need to be what we want it to be. I think Wallace could be served by ... a co-application process where it’s much [more] clear to the SEA [what resources we] are going to have to dedicate ... on this initiative over the next several years.”
(December 2, 2024)*

This quote suggests states and districts may need to begin the partnership by establishing a partnership framework that highlights complementary expertise, defines the roles of each partner, and is regularly revisited and revised.

Planning for sustainability from the start

State-district partnerships might be strengthened by addressing sustainability from the very beginning of the relationship. Such discussions may promote collaboration that extends beyond individuals and becomes inter-organizational. On the side of the state agency, discussing sustainability may help align the initiative with current state goals and integrate it into ongoing state priorities. For the district, discussions about sustainability may foster a vision of collaboration that extends beyond a relationship of compliance and moves the partnership towards support for the district's goals, co-design, and innovation.

Summary

The state-district partnerships in the ECPI redefine the traditional role of the state and demonstrate that district-state collaboration can be mutually beneficial. Collaboration with districts gave some state leaders insights into how standards and policies were implemented at the local level. The partnerships also broadened districts' access to state resources, and gave districts opportunities to inform the design and implementation of state policy. While these partnerships helped build trusting working relationships between individual partners, we also found that relationships based on personal networks proved vulnerable to staff turnover at the state level. Without establishing clear roles and expectations, connecting the partnership to key state priorities, and planning for sustainability from the start, district-state collaboration could fade quickly.

District Partnerships with Community-Based Organizations and Communities

Community engagement is a core design resource for developing equity-centered leadership pathways (Khalifa et al., 2016). Within the ECPI, districts were expected to develop their equity visions in active dialogue with families, community-based organizations, and local stakeholders, recognizing that inequities are experienced and understood differently across communities and cannot be addressed through district-centric definitions alone (Ishimaru, 2014). Community partners were to function as accountability anchors and co-designers, helping districts align leadership preparation, school practices, and pathway decisions with community values rather than abstract policy goals.

The community partnerships in our data were distinct from district partnerships with state education agencies and universities. First, districts received earmarked funds to engage with university and state partners but not with community partners. Districts did receive technical assistance from a nonprofit organization to strengthen community partnerships. Second, districts were not asked to name community partners in their initial grant applications to The Wallace Foundation. (All districts were required to name two university partners and a state agency partner.) In the first year of the ECPI, districts were asked to name “local community groups” that they could partner with to support the design and implementation of new school leader pathways. Finally, ECPI documents

specifically called out the engagement of families in one area only: The definition of equity and equity-centered leadership. The engagement of state agencies and university partners, by contrast, was not connected to a particular activity.

The community-based organizations that engaged in the ECPI work varied widely in their missions. Some were local chapters of the National Urban League or Teach for America, others supported the community schools in the district, and still others were exclusively dedicated to raising and administering funds for the district. None were directly involved in leadership development. The discrepancy between the focus of the ECPI and the missions of most community-based organizations created tensions between the districts and their community partners and made partnerships difficult to sustain. In addition, the emphasis on community-based organizations rather than *representatives* obscured some of the important ways in which district leaders integrated the voices of students, families, and community leaders into routines related to the selection and support of school leaders.

Typology of Community Partnerships

Our typology of district-community partnerships describes the engagement of community-based organizations in the ECPI, and also reflects the integration of community voice in leader pathways. We group district-community partnership types into the same three types as for the state-district partnership: *relational*, *operational*, and *collaborative* (Table 3).

Here, each category has a slightly different meaning than in the state-district context. In *relational* partnerships, districts solicited input from community members on specific topics, including equity-centered leadership. In some cases, community organizations served as liaisons between district leaders and community members. *Operational* relationships describe partnerships in which community-based organizations provided services to students and families served by the district. Lastly, in *collaborative* partnerships, community voices were woven into the internal routines and decision-making processes for districts.

Relational Partnerships

Districts that had a relational approach to community partners created opportunities for community members to inform district practices. The districts engaged community members not simply as external stakeholders, but as important sources of knowledge that could help district leaders better understand community needs. District leaders facilitated numerous structured activities to engage with community representatives, including open forums for families to share their perspectives and challenges, and invitations to serve on committees or councils. One district, for instance, invited community members to participate in a Math Advisory Council and Literacy Advisory Council, so they could help the district better understand community approaches to problem-solving. A district leader described the learning from community members as directly connected to the district’s approach to equity: “[A] lot of equity work is connecting with ... people and figuring out how they’re addressing problems of practice in their community, and how that could potentially benefit our students around that math goal” (May 10, 2023).

TABLE 3
Typology of District-Community Partnerships

Relational (n=6)	Operational (n=6)	Collaborative (n=5)
The district facilitates opportunities to hear from various community groups and members to increase the district’s knowledge of community needs	The district works with community organizations, who offer specific services that expand the district’s capacity to meet the needs of the communities it serves	The district integrates community perspectives and community voices into its internal routines
Examples		
Conducting listening sessions with parents and students to discuss equity-centered leadership; organizing community input sessions as part of the development of the district’s portrait of a leader; serving as a thought-partner for the district in strategic planning	Providing intensive tutoring for historically underserved youth; engaging teachers with emergency licenses in the district in culturally responsive learning; providing professional learning related to family engagement to central office staff; supporting the district in executing ECPI contracts, including with university partners	Districts established initiatives to co-design career fairs to increase the diversity of the teacher pool; incorporated community recommendations in the principal hiring process; convened a community council to keep the district accountable to its strategic plan; and partnered with community-based organizations to operate community schools in the district

In some cases, community organizations served as a liaison between districts and community members. A community organization in one district, for instance, met monthly with a group of Black leaders to discuss critical community needs, and then shared the insights from those meetings with senior district leadership. In another district, a community-based organization facilitated listening sessions with parents and students to discuss community expectations of equity-centered leaders. These examples illustrate how districts leveraged the social capital of community-based organizations to gain access to community perspectives and foster community engagement.

Operational Partnerships

In operational relationships, community-based organizations offered services to districts that expanded their internal capacity to meet the needs of youth and families. These organizations engaged in a range of activities with, or on behalf of, the district including: tutoring for students, wrap-around services for families, professional development for district staff, and fundraising to support innovative ideas across the district. One community-based organization highlighted the range of ways their organization had been providing support to students in the district: “The most important work we’re doing right now is intensive tutoring... and we also provide social emotional support... because we recognize that it’s a holistic issue. We’re doing our best to really provide true wraparound services for everybody” (July 14, 2023).

Another community-based organization helped the district place teachers in high-need areas, and provided support to teachers with emergency licenses. This partner also supported the design of advanced pathways for teachers and other school staff who aspired to move into leadership roles. Overall, while community-based organizations provided knowledge and resources that enabled districts to better meet the needs of historically underserved students, these resources seldom focused on leadership pathways.

Collaborative Partnerships

The third type of district-community partnership positioned community members as active participants in shaping the district’s operations, e.g., through community councils that held districts accountable to their strategic plan, and active participation in the principal recruitment and hiring process.

Three districts directly involved community members in the principal selection process. In one district, community

members served on a community panel made up of parents, staff, teachers, students, and other community members. The panel gave input on interview questions, met and evaluated potential candidates, and provided recommendations to the superintendent. A community partner for another district described family engagement in the principal and assistant principal selection process thus:

“I think that level of investment [was] something I hadn’t experienced before... Knowing that I was one of several parents, alongside teachers and current administrators, helping to select [school leaders]. Also there were parents who were collecting their concerns or the qualities that they were looking for in principals, and being able to feed those out to us as parent representatives. That felt really powerful, and, again, a very marked difference.” (July 13, 2023)

Community members served as accountability partners to districts as well. A district created a standing committee of over 100 stakeholders including parents, students, educators, and community members. The committee helps ensure that community voices, including those of youth, inform district policies. This has contributed to more child-centered approaches to the district’s strategic plan and resource allocation.

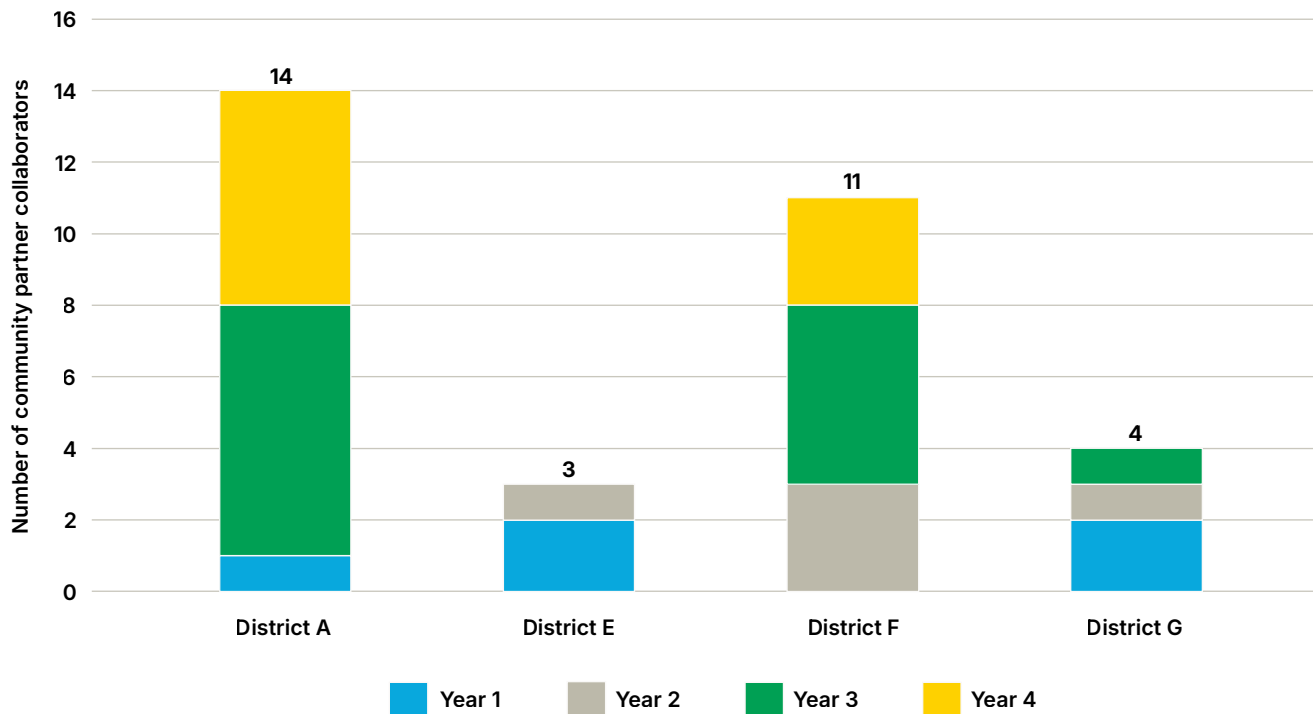
Insights from the Social Network Analysis

The social network data provides a general picture of the modest role that community-based organizations played in the ECPI design process. Four of the districts reported 0 or 1 collaborators over four years. The other four districts are represented in Figure 5. Two of these districts reported no connections in Year 4, which suggests that a partnership was established but not sustained. Only two of the districts reported connections between community partners and district partnership team members in Years 3 and 4.

It is important to emphasize that this evidence likely underrepresents the actual range of community engagement in the ECPI network. The survey could only capture community partners that were directly involved in the design and implementation of leader pathways. In addition, our data collection process limited the opportunities for community

FIGURE 5

Number of community partner collaborators within each district partnership team



representatives to take the survey. We administered the survey at ECPI-wide convenings or during DPT meetings, neither of which were typically attended by local community members.

Here the distinction between community *organizations* and *members* comes into play. Limited evidence of community partner participation does not necessarily mean limited community member engagement. Even if the social network data shows limited community partner ties, the qualitative data documents several meaningful ways that community voice shaped district routines and leadership-related decisions.

Lessons from Community-District Partnerships

Integrate more practices valued by community partners into district routines

District partnership with community partners can be strengthened if district leaders purposefully integrate practices valued by community-based organizations into district routines. One such practice described by a community partner was community asset mapping, a process where individuals identify

and describe assets in the community and often present them geographically on a map:

“I want the leaders, [including] future principals, assistant principals, whoever those leaders [may be], my push has been for them to learn how to do asset mapping. And in order to undertake that, I’m continuing to push that every school leader in that building – the principals, assistant principals, and teachers – should do asset mapping in and around their school buildings... That’s something that I know they want to do. But again, this is a logistical issue. It’s a capacity issue. We’ve got to figure out exactly how we make that [happen].” (July 14, 2023)

When district leaders incorporate practices valued by their community partners into district routines, they signal to those partners that the district and the community-based organizations are working towards shared goals, and that the

input of community-based organizations matters. Shared goals contribute to the sustainability of partnerships, and to their capacity to be mutually beneficial for all the partners involved.

Give community partners a meaningful seat at the table

At times, the community partners we interviewed spoke about being invited to district partnership meetings but feeling disconnected, because the meetings did not center the needs of the communities they served:

“[The community partner] perspective, at least from ... the community part of it, it wasn’t invited. And I had to sneak it in different places where I understood what was going on for me to interject. But my experience in those meetings, it was so disconnected from our community or at least what I felt like was what our community needed. So that was an instance that happened where I was like, “Let me interject here, this is problematic for me”, but I felt a bit out of place in those meetings.” (July 11, 2023)

To stay engaged, community partners naturally need to know that their input matters. We discussed earlier that few community partners felt that they could directly contribute to the design and implementation of leader pathways. Therefore, before inviting community partners to district partnership meetings, district leaders may want to discuss the partners’ goals with them. Once district leaders are aware of these goals, they will be better able to design a strategy for community partner involvement that is mutually beneficial, and advances both the district and the community partners’ aims.

Position representatives of community-based organizations as leaders in schools

Community partners described a relationship with the district that waxed and waned. Closer collaboration between districts and community-based organizations occurred when community partners were better informed about district priorities and were given opportunities to further those priorities. One community partner, for instance, highlighted the importance of treating community organization staff as leaders, and including them in professional learning opportunities that the district made available to school administrators:

“[Our partnership is in a stage of] reengagement and meaningful collaboration. I would say the district is actively working to engage and work with our community-based organizations. One example is that they have started to bring in community partners into their ... professional development weeks. So, for example, last summer was the first time they invited community-based organizations to attend the same professional development sessions as their building administrators. They also had some of their community-based organizations provide training and professional development around family engagement to [school administrators]. And they’re doing it again this year. So I think that this is one example that I can say that the district is trying to bring in community-based organizations, and also kind of sharing and demonstrating that these are leaders as well.” (July 26, 2023)

The quote above illustrates the power of a two-way partnership, in which community-based organizations both participate in district professional learning and provide professional learning to school staff. This type of partnership is mutually beneficial because it bolsters the standing of community-based organizations in schools and at the same time enables the district to benefit from the expertise of community partners.

Redesign and structure processes to incorporate community member voices

The third category in our typology, *collaborative partnerships*, highlights the importance of integrating community voice into district routines. All districts that included community panels in their principal selection process viewed them as an important component of community engagement. But how can districts ensure that such practices are sustained? Meaningful community engagement typically requires the time and effort of one or more district staff members. Districts can make this investment in community voice more permanent in several ways: adopting policy that codifies the community engagement practice, crafting district regulations that specify the roles of community members in district routines, and designing district accountability processes that incorporate community engagement, among others.

Summary

Our analysis speaks both to the challenges of engaging community-based organizations in work related to leadership pathways, and the importance of integrating community voices in district routines. The decision to include community perspectives in the ECPI process opened a valuable door into designing more responsive approaches to leadership development and support. The decision to focus on community organizations, rather than members, though, may have limited the district's efforts to integrate community perspectives into the different pipeline domains (see Figure 1).

Our insights related to community-based organizations suggest that a more expansive approach to community collaboration may provide a stronger foundation for district-community engagement. Most ECPI districts struggled to engage community-based organizations in their work on leader pathways, as reflected in the social network data. A key reason for this challenge seems to be that the priorities of community-based organizations were not directly tied to leader pathways. Most often, community-based organizations were focused on serving students and families, and not leaders.

A mutually beneficial way to engage community-based organizations would be to approach community-based organizations as *partners in serving students and families*, rather than as partners in supporting leader pathways. The district's role in the partnership would be to explore which community partners are valued by schools, what these partners do, and what practices schools can put in place so that the community partners' work can be as impactful as possible.

Further, districts could incorporate strategies for *strengthening community partnerships into the professional learning that school leaders receive*. Working in partnership with community-based organizations, and creating the conditions in schools that support their work, is a key part of equity-centered school leadership. This would position community engagement both as an input for the design of equity-centered leadership, and as an important outcome practice for equity-centered school leaders. This area of equity-centered leadership could be highlighted as an important component of the mentoring, coaching, and professional learning that school leaders receive from the district.

District Partnerships with Institutions of Higher Education

Higher education partners are key actors in shaping who becomes a school leader and how they are prepared to create and sustain more equitable schools.

Collaboration between districts and universities can help align leadership preparation with local needs, strengthen clinical experiences, and support the development of leaders capable of advancing equitable teaching and learning conditions (Turnbull et al., 2016; Herman et al., 2022).

Prior to the ECPI, each district was asked to identify two universities that would support the work on the initiative. Our analysis indicates that the partners collaborated to adapt or redesign preservice and in-service leadership programs, so that these programs would reflect locally defined equity priorities. Many university partners made substantive changes to their programming for aspiring leaders, and some engaged in a collaborative redesign process that yielded entirely new, custom programs.

Typology of ECPI District and University Partnerships

Our typology of district-university partnerships is based on the different roles that the district context and district staff played in the university partners' design of new programming for school leaders. This typology spans the educational leadership

continuum, addressing both pre-service preparation and ongoing professional development.

The typology distinguishes between *responsive*, *tailored*, and *co-designed* approaches to clarify how varying levels of district influence and joint decision-making shaped the structure, content, and implementation of leadership development programming. Universities engaged in *responsive* partnership when they adjusted existing programs to accommodate district needs. In a *tailored* partnership, higher education leaders made more significant changes to their programming in response to district needs, including designing new courses and clinical experiences. They crafted these changes in consultation with district leaders but district leaders were not directly involved in the program design. Finally, in *co-design*, district and university partners collaborated on making revisions to programs and integrating district equity priorities into the content and assignments that leaders could access.

Responsive Partnerships

The universities that were part of responsive partnerships modified elements of their existing programs to strengthen their emphasis on equity. For example, one partner institution met with district leaders and other stakeholders to discuss how to embed equity throughout the coursework. This partner used the state education agency's equity definition, which

TABLE 4

Typology of District-University Partnerships

Responsive (n=3)	Tailored (n=7)	Co-designed (n=6)
The IHE partner makes small changes to its existing programming to accommodate the district's leadership needs.	The IHE partner designs or makes substantive adaptations to their preservice or professional learning programs to ensure it reflects the district's leadership needs.	The IHE partner collaborates with the district in designing preservice or professional learning programs specifically to meet the district needs and interests.
Examples		
One university partner revised its existing coursework based on the state's equity definition. One university placed district candidates into a district-specific cohort.	Several university partners redesigned the content of their existing leader preparation courses to align with districts' equity-centered leader standards.	Some universities and districts created "aspiring principal" programs to develop sitting assistant principals as equity-centered leaders.

largely aligned with the district's but remained broad enough to serve candidates from other districts as well. The program administrator explained, "[The state] definition, we felt, would serve our students in [the district] best, because they're going to be in [the state]. They're going to be licensed in [the state]." (August 24, 2022).

Another program administrator echoed this desire for balancing the needs of all the candidates they serve, regardless of the district they worked in. This partner explained that they have begun having meetings with district leaders to "talk about what's going on in [the district]" and better understand how the university could serve the preservice leaders' needs. This change has improved the clinical experience by helping the program administrator "pair up field candidates with specific administrators to mentor them" (November 6, 2024). These examples illustrate how universities responded to their district partners' programmatic needs and at the same time strove to keep their programming relevant to contexts beyond the partner district.

Tailored Partnerships

Tailored partnerships resulted in substantial revisions of existing programming. For example, across the ECPI, these university partners sought to integrate the district's equity definition into its coursework. In two partnerships, university

representatives met with district leaders to create a shared definition of equity, which the university partners then used to guide their syllabi. In the remaining partnerships in this category, the university representatives modified their course syllabi to reflect the district's equity definition. As one program coordinator explained, "[The district] developed [equity] profiles, and we embedded those profiles into the syllabi" (December 5, 2024). In addition to embedding the districts' equity definitions throughout their coursework, two universities also created district-specific course assignments. These assignments included conducting an equity audit of the school site and developing a critical school improvement plan.

The tailored partnerships reflected programmatic changes at an administrative level as well. One university began making admission decisions based on an equity-centered rubric developed by the district. This allowed them to screen for candidates who held dispositions that aligned with the district's stated equity values. Eight universities admitted district-specific cohorts into their programs, creating opportunities for aspiring leaders to anchor class discussions in the context of their own district. In five university programs, district leaders served as instructors in some capacity. Two of these examples involved central office leaders as guest lecturers. Two universities used co-teaching between district leaders and university faculty, and one university hired district leaders as adjunct faculty to



teach some of the courses in its principal preparation program. A university partner described the benefits of co-teaching in these terms: “I am co-teaching with [a district leader] and we are innovating on the curriculum. We have put assignments in place where they are thinking as leaders” (meeting notes, April 27, 2023).

Co-designed Partnerships

In co-design, partners worked together to build new district-specific pre-service and/or in-service programs. University preservice and professional learning programs were customized to the needs of the district. In tailored partnerships, the universities designed the programs for the districts; in co-designed partnerships, the districts and the universities designed the programs together. “I would say [designing together] is really what helped our relationship grow with the [the district]. We wanted to be partners in the process. ... We didn’t try to just redesign our courses in isolation” (university partner, July 31, 2024). All of the programs in the co-designed category engaged current district leaders as instructors, either in co-teaching models (n=5) or as adjunct faculty (n=1). Most of these programs (n=4) served current school leaders who already held administrative licenses, distinguishing them from the preservice programs that were the focus of other universities.

Insights from the Social Network Analysis

The social network data helps us map the nature and evolution of district-university partnerships. By examining patterns of connectivity and interaction over time, we provide insights into how partnerships move from relatively loose coordination toward more integrated forms of collaboration that support leadership pathway redesign.

We also showcase variation. This variation is natural in a sample of 16 partnerships. It is also to be expected that the purpose and nature of partnerships change over time. Since the partnerships were focused on the development of programming, we expect that the collaborative nature of the relationship would change once this programming was designed and implemented.

Partnerships took time to become established

The number of connections between districts and their university partners increased over time. There was little or modest growth in the number of actors who collaborated with university partners in the first two years of the ECPI (see Figure 6). However, we observed a substantial increase in the number of connections across all districts between Years 2 and 3. Growth continued from Year 3 to 4, with a modest increase in the number of connections. These findings suggest that district-university partnerships took about two years to

develop into more connected forms of collaboration, and that these forms of collaboration stabilized in the later years of the initiative.

Partnerships evolved in dissimilar ways

Data on the nature of district-university partnerships illustrate three different developmental patterns. In some partnerships, both the information-sharing and joint-work connections increased over time, and especially after Year 2 (see Figure 7a for an example). In other partnerships, the number of collaborative ties decreased in Year 4 (see Figure 7b for an example). In still others, the trajectory of collaboration was more complex (see Figure 7c for an example), with joint work increasing and information sharing decreasing.

It is important to note that these three patterns do not map cleanly onto our typology. Both Figure 7b and 7c illustrate partnerships in the *co-designed* category, but they show different developmental trajectories. We discuss the implications of this finding in the next subsection.

The variation that we see in the three trajectories above can have multiple causes. It may be related to the roles

and responsibilities that the district and university partner established for one another. Our qualitative evidence suggests that these roles evolved over time, in some cases towards joint work and in others towards information-sharing. In addition, the partnership trajectories may be impacted by the nature of the work that was the focus of the partnerships. If the main goal of the partnership was to develop a professional learning program for the district’s assistant principals, close collaboration might not have been necessary once the program was launched. The social network data, therefore, encourages us to think of partnerships as dynamic. It highlights the importance of partners consistently asking themselves: *What does our collaboration need to look like so we can accomplish our evolving goals? What resources and infrastructures do we need to have in place to enact our vision?*

Collaboration and co-design are different

We saw little relationship between the nature of collaboration and the university partners’ approach to partnerships as described by the qualitative typology. Joint work collaboration, as measured by our social network survey, occurred in all three partnership categories (responsive, tailored, and co-designed). This pattern suggests that the partnership typology captures

FIGURE 6
Number of Collaborators for University Partners

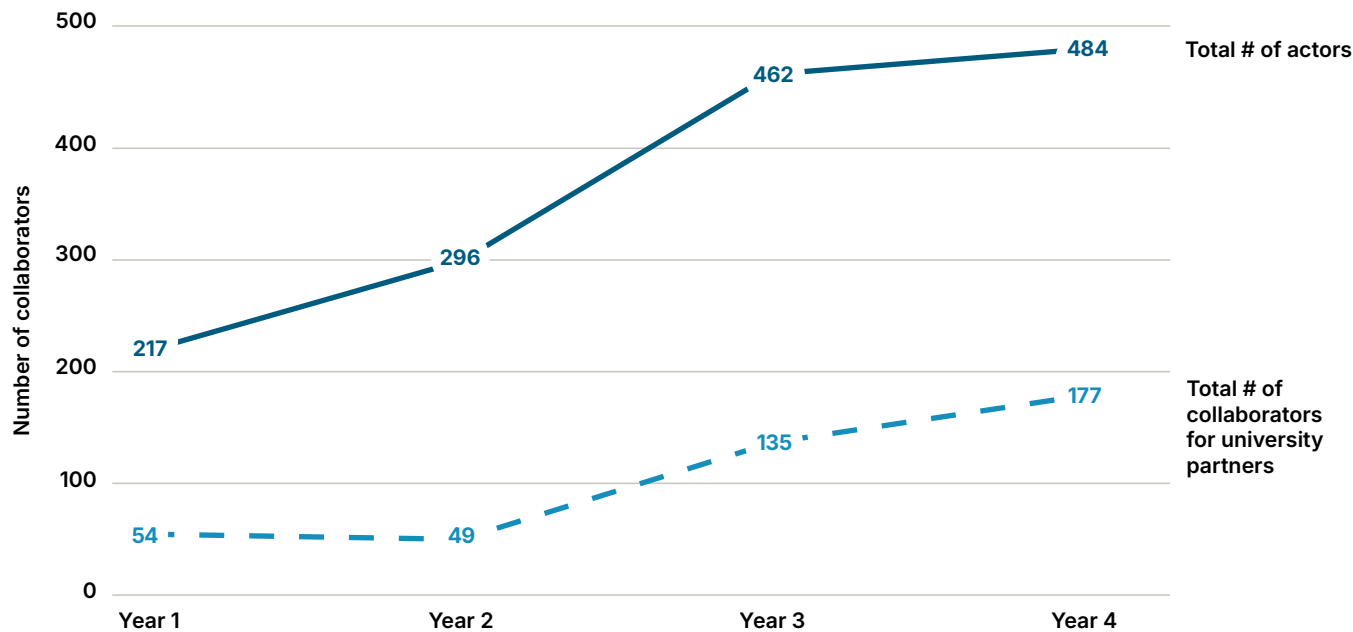


FIGURE 7
Evolution of collaboration over time



differences in how the university programs were designed, while the network connections reflect how collaboration was enacted within the DPTs. Strong collaboration within the DPT could result in any of the three types of partnerships, depending on the roles of each university partner within the ECPI ecosystem.

In sum, our findings indicate that collaboration between districts and universities occurred across all partnership types. As suggested in prior research (Herman et al., 2022; Turnbull, et. al., 2016), sustained collaboration between districts and universities can support a range of partnership goals, including but not limited to the design of customized ECPI programs.

Lessons from District-University partnerships

Engaging in a formative, equity-focused self-assessment contributes to program change

In the ECPI, universities received resources to participate in a self-assessment process early in the initiative. This process helped university faculty and administrators identify specific changes they wanted to make to strengthen the equity focus of their programs. The self-assessment motivated revisions even for partners who had recently revised their programming. In discussing the process, one university partner observed, “We redesigned our program four or five years ago, but looking at the document helps us see that we’re not done... That’s a big accomplishment for us” (post-assessment reflection, September 30, 2022). Other universities initially presumed their programs to already have an equity focus, but the self-assessment tool helped them see things differently: “Diversity is one of the university’s institutional values and we realized literally with the first [self-assessment] question that within our culture there is an unintentional, perhaps haphazard, interchange of the concepts of ‘equity’ and ‘diversity,’ with the result that neither is front and center in our program mission” (interim progress report, April 29, 2022).

Completing a formative self-assessment also created opportunities for greater collaboration between district and university leaders. As one district reported:

“Both university partners have included [district] administrative staff as part of their [self-assessment] team. ... As a result of [the self-assessment at one university], they determined that the Principal Preparation Program did not have a definition of an equity-centered leader. As a result, the faculty developed a draft that is being reviewed by both district and community partners.” (interim progress report, April 29, 2022)

Another university partner reported, “We determined that: we want to build and nurture stronger partnerships with districts, clearly define equity minded leadership, and strengthen clinical practice to be sure all activities align to the context of the district in which the students are serving” (post-evaluation reflection, September 30, 2022).

Successful partnerships require boundary-spanning

The district leaders who planned and guided the work of the district partnership teams were instrumental in deepening and sustaining the collaboration between districts and universities. These team facilitators often acted as boundary spanners who fostered trust, clarified roles, navigated or removed barriers, and promoted collaboration (c.f. Honig & Hatch, 2004). As one district wrote, “establishing key [district] personnel as liaisons between [the university], [the district], and the cohorts themselves” was a key strategy used to bolster the partnership (interim progress report, January 12, 2024). A university partner expressed a similar idea: “Sometimes communication wasn’t as clear... Once we had the stability of one person, [the team facilitator], all of that kind of ironed out” (October 2, 2024).

As boundary spanners, team facilitators understood the institutional culture of both the district and the university, and were essential in garnering support for the partnership among university faculty and staff not directly involved in the ECPI. One university program director shared, “[The team facilitator] has actually helped me figure out how to package things in ways that are palpable for faculty, because there’s a lot here at [the university] that is left to faculty” (July 30, 2024). As skilled and trusted communicators who understood both their district and the university contexts, team facilitators contributed tremendously to developing and maintaining partnerships.

Long-term collaboration requires infrastructure

Shared structures and interaction processes helped strengthen district-university partnerships. Regular (typically monthly) team meetings provided opportunities to build relationships, co-construct work, and maintain open communication between ECPI partners. One team facilitator noted:

“This is not necessarily about the work, but the way that you bring everybody together, so that there’s the vested interest to buy in. Everybody can speak intelligently about it, and be able to help push it forward, and be a champion for it in a way that is very authentic.” (August 3, 2023)

Regarding co-teaching specifically, one university partner shared that having district leaders as co-instructors was a “gift,” and “helps us improve in a formative as well as summative way” (meeting notes, April 27, 2023). Both these excerpts speak to the importance of structures that consistently bring district and university leaders together, and enable the partners to work together toward shared priorities.

University partners can provide support to in-service, as well as pre-service leaders

While most district-university partnerships in the ECPI focused on preservice principal preparation, some aimed to provide much needed support to current leaders. Five partnerships collaborated on in-depth professional learning programs for sitting leaders, both principals and assistant/vice principals. Such endeavors provided at least two benefits. First, establishing distinct roles for the two university partners avoided positioning them as rivals who would be vying for the same students and providing similar programs. Second, focusing on in-service learning enabled districts to leverage universities’ expertise in leadership development, and use this expertise to promote the continued growth of school leaders. As a director of one such program explained, “My vision [is] to continue to grow the partnership, to continue to collaborate... and make sure that we are working with our [district partners] to help [their school leaders] be the best they can be” (October 10, 2024).

Summary

Districts and universities typically have related but distinct missions related to the preparation and professional growth of school leaders. Working together on the design of preparation programs and professional learning opportunities can bring greater alignment to these differing missions. Partnerships like the ECPI can create a shared commitment and sense of urgency toward advancing equity in schools.

The three types of district-university partnerships we identify reflect different approaches to the collaborative design of preservice and professional learning programs. It is not our intention to suggest one is inherently better than another. Rather we aim to highlight various benefits and trade-offs associated with each partnership type. *Responsive* partnerships resulted in principal preparation programs that were equity-centered in ways that could benefit aspiring leaders across the entire state. A trade-off of such programs was that they were less aligned to the district partner’s specific needs. *Tailored* partnerships provided programs focused squarely on a district’s leadership needs, but did not actively engage district leaders in the design process. While this approach reduced the burden placed on district leaders, it did not fully leverage district expertise. Finally, a *co-designed* partnership brought together the expert knowledge of both the district and the university to provide aspiring principals with a highly customized experience. This type of partnership, however, requires a greater time commitment from both partners and a willingness to share control over program design.

In addition to collaboratively designing programming for aspiring and current school leaders, district-university partnerships have other mutual benefits. *The use of co-teaching* provides districts with leader candidates who have relevant theoretical as well as practical understanding, and universities with constant feedback on how to make their programs more responsive. Working closely in this way contributes to joint ownership of leadership programs, which enhances their quality and credibility. By *integrating higher education expertise into their operations*, districts can develop internal capacities that will contribute to sustaining the leadership preparation and development work without external funding. Similarly, universities benefit by *learning with the districts*, which can inform future research pursuits. In sum, our findings illustrate that the ECPI focus on close partnership had multiple benefits for all the organizations involved.

Conclusions

This report addresses the role of partnerships in district reform focused on equity-centered leadership.

We discuss three types of collaboration that are essential to districts' efforts to prepare and grow equity-centered leaders: partnerships with state education agencies, communities, and institutions of higher education. State agencies can support equity-centered leadership by adopting state standards that explicitly name equity, and integrating equity-centered practices in leader evaluation. Community representatives help ensure that districts' expectations for equity-centered leaders reflect local aspirations and needs. Collaboration between districts and universities contributes to the alignment of leader growth opportunities and preparation programs with districts' equity-centered vision and priorities.

We illustrate that partnerships can take different forms. We classify each type of partnership (district-state, district-community, and district-university) into three distinct categories. State partners served as thought-partners to districts, provided technical assistance, and (in rare cases) engaged in the co-design of tools and resources to support equity-centered leadership. District-community partnerships differed based on the role that the community organizations played: from amplifying community voices to providing services to students and families. An important category of district-community partnerships was the inclusion of community members in district practices related to the hiring and support for school leaders. Partnerships between districts and universities also differed. Some universities made minor changes to their programming for school leaders, while others made substantive revisions or created entirely new programs. Some university partners collaborated closely with district leaders in the redesign process, and in other cases the redesign was done primarily by university faculty and staff.

Our analysis revealed several themes that cut across partnerships. First, all partnerships would benefit from establishing clear expectations and role definitions early in the

process. The partners can work on developing a framework that highlights complementary expertise, defines the roles of each partner, and is regularly revisited and revised. Second, partnerships are more likely to endure if they are mutually beneficial. Partners need to feel that their voices matter and their expertise is relevant. For this to happen, both partners may have to transcend established roles. State agencies, for instance, can seek opportunities to engage districts in authentic collaboration that supports both state and district priorities related to equity-centered leadership. Districts' collaboration with university partners can extend beyond principal preparation, and include professional learning for sitting school administrators and central office leaders. With respect to community partners, district leaders can include practices valued by community members (such as community asset mapping) into district routines.

Third, partnerships did not always become stronger over time. District-state partnerships were particularly vulnerable to turnover and reorganization at the state agency, and in some cases drastically diminished in the fourth year of the initiative. Few community organizations remained consistently engaged with the initiative throughout the four years of data collection. In addition, while collaboration between university partners and district leaders generally increased over time, not all district-university partnerships followed this pattern. These findings suggest that it is difficult to predict what trajectory a partnership will take.

The purpose of this report is to highlight variation across partnerships, and offer insights about how partners can engage in collaboration that is mutually beneficial. We hope that the specific examples provided here can help district leaders and their partners more clearly define how they want to engage with one another based on their goals, resources, and constraints. Our recommendations can provide guidance in making partnerships more robust and likely to be sustained.

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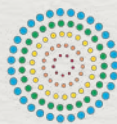
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Appendix

Data Source	Type/Frequency	Date Range
Meeting Notes	Monthly Team Meetings	November 2021 through June 2025
	Days with Wallace	May 2022, May 2023, April 2024, April 2025
	Virtual Convenings	November 2021, March 2022, June 2022
	In-person Convenings	Twice a year, fall 2022 to spring 2025
Equity Reviews	Once	January/February 2022
ECPI Deliverables	Grant Application	April 2021
	Annual Workplans	December 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024
	Interim Progress Reports	April 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025
	Definitions of Equity	February 2022
	Definitions of an Equity-Centered Leader	February 2022
	Logic Models	June 2022, spring 2025
Interviews	District Leaders (n=48)	August 2023 through February 2025
	State Partners (n=18)	August 2022 through December 2024
	Community Partners (n=7)	August 2022 through December 2024
	University Partners (n=36)	August 2022 through February 2025
Member Reflections	Annually	November 2022 through December 2025



CALL/ECL
Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership Learning/
Equity-Centered Leadership