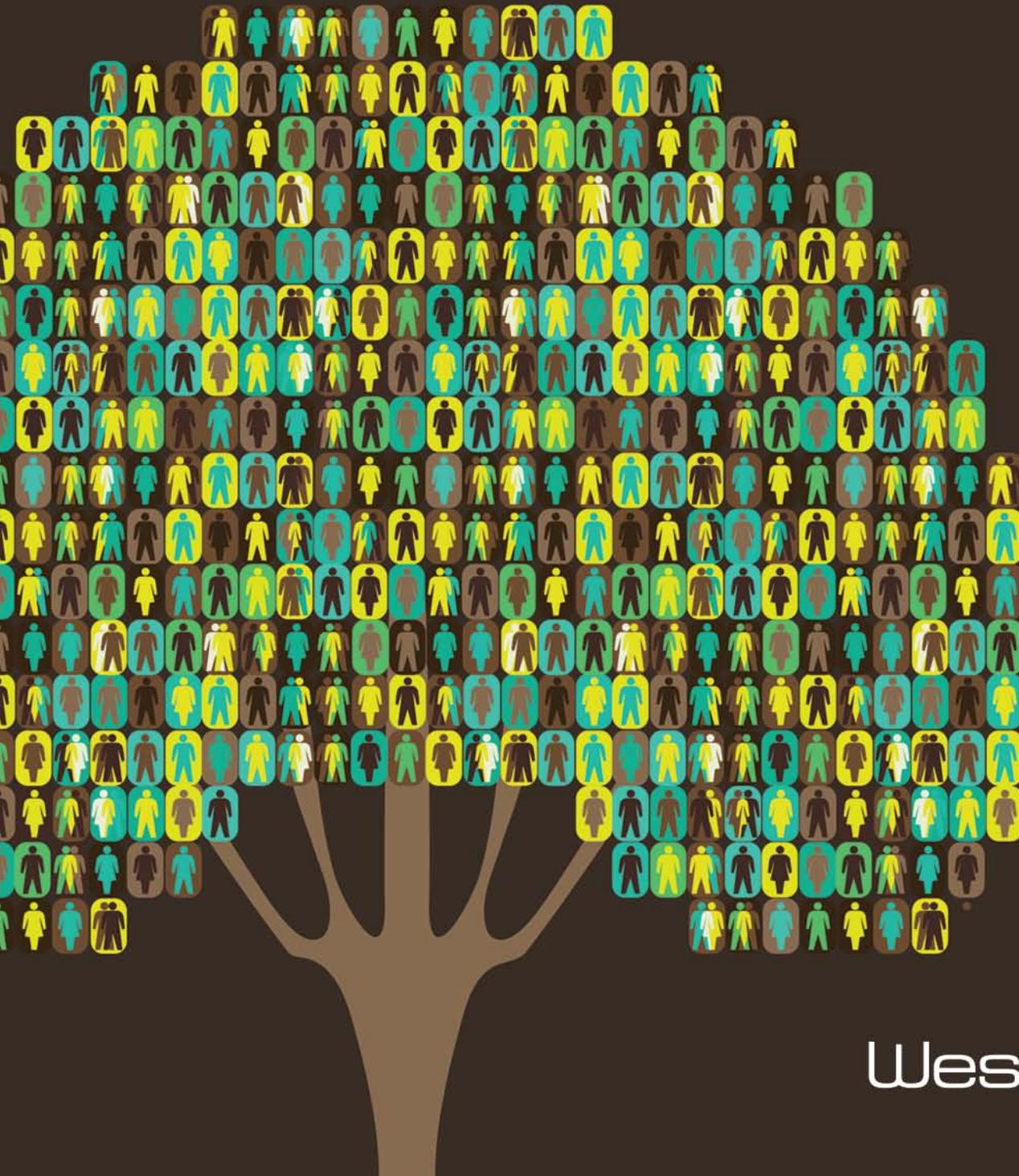




Forward, Together:

Better Schools Through Labor-Management Collaboration





WestEd — a national nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency — works with education and other communities to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has 17 offices nationwide, from Boston and Washington to Arizona and California, with headquarters in San Francisco. More information about WestEd is available at WestEd.org.

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Like all systems, we face many challenges: shrinking resources, public perception issues, respect, more demands on teacher time, and more children with greater needs. These challenges require the collective thinking of all of us to find viable solutions. Without true labor-management collaboration, great teachers are driven from the profession, and we will not be able to attract and retain the best and brightest candidates.

- Local union president, 2011 national Labor-Management Collaboration Conference, Denver

Introduction

Public education in America is facing unprecedented challenges. Educational policies of the past two decades have not delivered what was promised, and accountability pressures for educators continue to mount amidst a financial crisis that has caused devastating cuts in school budgets. Not surprisingly, relations between management and unions have become severely strained in many of the nation's school districts. But despite enormous obstacles, management and union leaders in a small number of districts have taken an unusual and courageous step—they have abandoned their long-standing adversarial relationships and are working as partners. They are solving problems collaboratively, crafting innovative agreements, and improving academic outcomes for their students. The positive results achieved in these districts through labor-management collaboration—and the dismal results associated with an adversarial approach—strongly suggest that labor-management collaboration is a critical precursor to educational progress.

But if this bold hypothesis is true, why have so few districts adopted a collaborative approach to labor relations? One reason is that labor-management success stories have not been widely disseminated. Consequently, most educators are unaware of the benefits or the changes required for successful collaboration. Another reason is that the decades-old “us-versus-them” paradigm is deeply engrained in the culture of America's public schools.

There are indications, however, that America's labor-management paradigm might be changing. Several national organizations that represent labor and management have taken a pro-collaboration stance. In 2010, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, proposed “a new path forward” to improve teaching and the quality of the nation's schools. She said:

We'd like to see governors, mayors, school boards, teachers unions, and other stakeholders start building protocols and trust for their labor-management relationship, in order to better deliver to children that most essential and fundamental right: a great education.



The nation's largest teacher union, the National Education Association (NEA), has also responded to the call for collaboration. Author Steve Snider observed recently on the NEA website:

At the same time educators in several states face legislation to strip their right to bargain with school districts on most issues, teachers and support professionals in those states and across the country have entered a new era of collaborative reform with their school districts (Snider, 2011).

The first major call by a union leader for union-management collaboration occurred over a decade ago with the founding of the Teachers Union Reform Network (TURN). In 2003, the organization's founding director Adam Urbanski wrote:

Central to any specific efforts to improve our urban schools is the relationship between the school managers and the teachers' union. Without labor-management collaboration, even the best efforts of management are tantamount to one-hand clapping... Both districts and unions must involve teachers and district administrators in the shaping of policies and in their search for effective strategies for supporting students' learning (Urbanski, 2003).

Last year in Denver, Colorado, the nation's largest teacher labor unions, national organizations representing school administrators and school boards, and the U.S. Department of Education co-sponsored an historic event that may have signaled the beginning of a new era of collaborative labor-relations in education.¹ Teacher union leaders, superintendents, and school board presidents from 150 school districts throughout the U.S. participated in a two-day conference designed to promote student achievement through labor-management collaboration.² In their welcoming message to conference attendees, the co-sponsors wrote:

Your school district is among 150 from across the country that have asked to be part of this initiative—to take a fresh look at how we improve and strengthen labor-management relationships, policies, and agreements with the goal of improving instruction and student achievement, and how we hold ourselves and each other responsible and accountable for achieving these goals. You have agreed to revisit both what underlies a successful labor-management relationship and the myriad of issues that affect it, including transparency, hiring and retention, equity, compensation, instruction, professional development, and evaluation. That means the stakes are high for you, your constituencies, and the students and communities for whom you work, so we salute your courage and your leadership.³

¹ The conference was co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, the American Association of School Administrators, the American Federation of Teachers, the Council of Great City Schools, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, the National Education Association, and the National School Boards Association.

² The conference was so popular that conference organizers were forced to turn away over 100 district teams because the conference facility could not accommodate them.

³ The complete text of the welcoming message is available at <http://www.ed.gov/labor-management-collaboration/conference/welcome-message>



Conference attendees heard presentations from 12 school districts where labor-management collaboration is becoming a key lever for reform. A team from Hillsborough, Florida, explained how trust and improved communication led to a contract that provides extra pay for teachers who take on peer mentoring and evaluation responsibilities. Management and labor leaders from Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland described the benefits of the district’s collaborative culture, including the development of the district’s Professional Growth Systems for teachers, administrators, and support staff.⁴

Although these examples of reform and the new calls for labor-management collaboration are impressive, only a small number of districts in the country have managed to establish collaborative partnerships. Most of these pioneers have dedicated years to the process, and many have worked in isolation with little outside assistance or a research base to guide them. Notably, nearly nine out of ten leaders who attended the Denver conference thought it was useful, but it is doubtful that stand-alone events can, without ongoing support, lead to long-term transformations of labor management practices (Odom, 2009). Nor will conferences like these reach hundreds of other district leaders who would eagerly participate but cannot attend because of travel costs and limited capacity.

If labor-management collaboration is to become the rule rather than the exception for public education in America, every district in the nation that is ready and willing to adopt a collaborative approach will need access to useful research on effective labor-management practices. They will need on-the-ground technical assistance from experienced experts and access to networks of educators who are committed to such collaborative policies and practices. And because the stakes are so high and the obstacles to a collaborative approach so formidable, districts will need encouragement and support from every quarter: from policymakers; from state and national organizations that represent school boards, administrators, and teacher unions; and from local community organizations. Those who have a stake in education can no longer take a hands-off position or, worse, be complicit in perpetuating an adversarial model that has failed to serve America’s students.

Today, little is known about the conditions that enable labor and management leaders to collaborate effectively or whether conferences like the one in Denver can jump-start or strengthen labor-management partnerships. Without such knowledge, district, state, and national stakeholders are left to solve the challenge entirely on their own, and additional conferences could be a waste of time and money.

With generous support from the Ford Foundation, a research team at WestEd⁵ conducted a study to help build a much-needed knowledge base on labor-management collaboration.⁶ Section 1 describes the largely positive response to the Denver conference and the lessons learned from it. To help understand the conference’s impact, this section also summarizes what districts have accomplished 12 months after the event. In addition, the section summarizes attendees’ perceptions of the conference’s strengths and weaknesses.

⁴ Descriptions of the presentations made by the 12 presenting districts are available at <http://www.ed.gov/labor-management-collaboration/conference>

⁵ WestEd, a nonprofit research, development, and service agency, works with education and other communities to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults.

⁶ The methodology of the study is described in Appendix A.



Section 2 identifies factors that promote effective labor-management collaboration, such as the type of leadership that is needed from various stakeholder groups. According to attendees, superintendents, labor leaders and school board members must be excellent listeners, genuinely interested in diverse perspectives and able to disagree without being disagreeable. Their actions must be motivated, first and foremost, by an unwavering commitment to short- and long-term benefits for students.

Section 3 focuses on factors that impede effective labor-management collaboration. Reluctance to change and the absence of trust are particularly difficult challenges for districts in the early stages of collaboration. For districts working to sustain their collaborative efforts, broken promises, changes in leadership, and external policy changes are significant impediments.

Section 4 focuses on the types of technical assistance participants said would strengthen their collaboration efforts. Local stakeholders overwhelmingly expressed interest in ongoing, targeted assistance in areas such as improving organizational trust and communication; developing collaborative strategies that directly improve student learning; and opportunities to network with other districts engaged in the same work.

Section 5 offers some conclusions about the findings and makes specific recommendations for conference planners, labor and management leaders, and technical assistance providers.



Section 1: Lessons Learned from the Denver Labor-Management Collaboration Conference

Forty-seven percent of survey respondents indicated that, overall, the conference was *somewhat useful*, 41 percent thought it was *very useful*, and 12 percent reported that it was *not useful*. Among the respondents who spoke positively about the conference, many reported that relations between labor and management in their districts improved afterwards. Several board members, union leaders, and superintendents said the conference sparked new dialogue focused on programs and practices designed to improve student learning outcomes. One team member wrote, “Before this conference there were only adversarial conversations among the three stakeholders. We meet regularly now to collaborate around student success in our district.” As one labor leader said, “We would not have started any collaboration at all if not for the conference invitation and everything that went along with that.” Among the respondents who did not find the conference useful, some said they were already collaborating effectively and had not learned much from the presenting districts, while others expressed disappointment that the conference did not reveal any new avenues of funding.

Interviewees and survey respondents identified three aspects of the conference that were particularly valuable: (1) hearing powerful stories from exemplary districts; (2) learning about creative solutions to difficult challenges, such as alternative compensation and educator evaluation; and (3) having time to meet and develop action plans with their district colleagues. Many interviewees pointed to the success stories they heard from the presenting districts—stories that contrasted sharply with the negative ones they were accustomed to in their own districts. The respondents were particularly impressed with the determination and creativity that enabled district and union leaders to work through acrimonious relationships. Referring to a presentation from the Montgomery County district team, a union leader remarked, “It really helped us bridge our own differences and enabled us to understand how we could treat negotiations differently.” One superintendent remarked, “I was really inspired seeing how districts got through some very difficult times.”

Nearly one-quarter of interviewees said the conference presentations had sparked new dialogue and fundamentally changed stakeholder relationships in their districts. One labor leader said she learned how to approach labor-management meetings in a more informal and personable style—a method, she said, that has made her meetings more productive. Several administrators noted that having school board members at the conference allowed elected officials to engage in important dialogue away from the board room which, in some cases, jump-started collaboration districtwide.

Several interviewees said they gained valuable insights from the presentations on particularly challenging topics, including alternative compensation, peer assistance and review, and educator evaluation. One superintendent said these presentations reassured stakeholders in his district that difficult initiatives could be pursued successfully.

A conference highlight for several interviewees was the uninterrupted time teams had to discuss what they had learned and develop initial action plans in breakout sessions. Several attendees said



this was the first time all three primary stakeholders had ever engaged in productive dialogue with one another. “The time to speak together was critical—it’s where our conversation really began,” said one superintendent. One school board member reported that his team made a written commitment to collaborate during its team meeting. Others also commented on how the conference helped them to improve the quality of communication in their district. Another board member pointed out that he and his colleagues left Denver committed to negotiating at least some district issues without attorneys at the table.

Finally, several interviewees said the breakout sessions served as a benchmark for collaboration in their own districts. One labor leader said, “We weren’t sure we were going in the right direction. To see there were other districts around the country taking bold moves and rethinking how they provide services for students was reassuring.”

Suggestions for Conference Improvement

While the majority of stakeholders found the conference valuable, many had suggestions for improving future conferences. Several individuals felt rushed and wished the conference would have been longer. A number of these interviewees wanted more time with their teams to incorporate what they had learned into their actions plans. A few interviewees suggested having a more defined structure and increased facilitation to support the team members’ conversations. Several interviewees wanted more time to attend all of the breakout sessions and to interact with the presenters.

A handful of interviewees wanted to hear from districts more similar to their own. Many conference presenters represented large and relatively well-resourced districts, and in several cases, these districts had been working on collaboration for many years. Although this information undoubtedly inspired some team members, it was disillusioning for those from smaller districts with fewer resources. They suggested that future conferences also include presentations from rural and suburban districts, as well as some that are still in the early stages of collaboration. As one rural district superintendent recommended, “There should be presentations from smaller districts that have difficulties like we are facing. What we saw was the best of the best with many of those districts having worked together for years.” Many attendees wanted to know more about the initial stages of the work and the factors that enabled collaboration. In the words of one superintendent, “I’m at the bottom of all this, trying to make it work. We need other perspectives that answer the question, ‘How do I get from here to there?’”

Many interviewees thought the conference’s value could be leveraged with various follow-up activities. One labor leader suggested that stakeholder teams share progress on their action plans through conference calls or other forms of virtual meetings. He believed this follow-up would not happen without networking support from outside facilitators. Others suggested establishing an online clearinghouse with articles, research studies, and resources to help districts become more collaborative.



What Districts Accomplished After the Conference

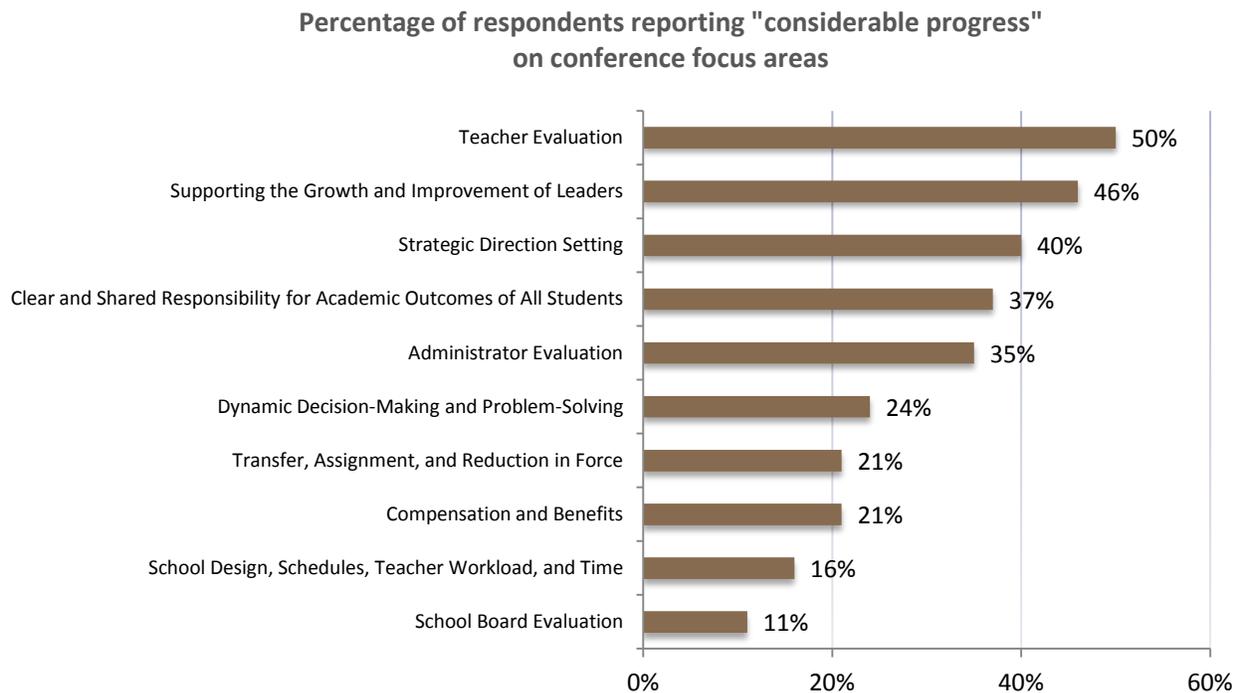
Survey results indicate progress has been made in many districts since the Denver meeting. At the end of the conference, district teams were asked to write action plans listing the concrete steps they would take to advance labor-management collaboration. Figure 1 below contains survey responses on the status of these plans.

Figure 1: Current Status of District Team Actions Plans

Our team did not develop an action plan at (or after) the conference.	30.7% (39)
We developed an action plan, but our district has not implemented <i>any</i> part of this plan.	18.1% (23)
We developed an action plan, and our district has implemented some elements of the plan.	34.6% (44)
We developed an action plan, and our district has implemented <i>most</i> or <i>all</i> elements of this plan.	16.5% (21)

Survey respondents reported progress related to each of the conference's 10 focus areas. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents who said their districts had made "considerable progress." Interestingly, districts reported significantly more progress in some focus areas than others. This study was unable to ascertain whether low-progress areas, like *School Board Evaluation*, are more difficult challenges for districts or whether districts are less concerned about addressing them.

Figure 2: Areas of District Progress One Year After the Conference





Stakeholders shared a few promising programs and practices that occurred as a result of what was learned at the conference. A suburban labor leader explained how three of the district's unions (teachers, classified staff, and administrators) agreed to meet annually with school board members to study the district's financials. In another case, a board member from an urban district said an alternative compensation committee with teachers and administrators had formed and made a commitment to adopt an approach that would maximize student learning.

Summary

Post-conference feedback indicates that a number of attendees have made meaningful progress on labor-management initiatives over the past year. Nearly all survey respondents and interviewees expressed enthusiasm about future conferences and suggested ways of improving or extending conference activities to benefit more districts. Specific conference recommendations are detailed in Section 5.



Section 2: Factors That Promote Successful Labor-Management Collaboration

This section identifies bright spots in labor-management collaboration and highlights some effective practices, which Denver conference attendees shared. Several interviewees expressed optimism about their early collaboration. One interviewee said, “This is the first time we have had trust at our table.” A school board leader described how employees had been able to see their union leader, school board leader, and superintendent stand in front of a room and present ideas *together* for the first time. Interviewees in *later stages of collaboration* described numerous labor-management collaboration benefits, including new ways of solving problems together, improved grievance procedures, and collaboratively designed teacher and administrator performance review programs. Nearly all interviewees were quick to point out that these accomplishments did not happen without constant attention to the collaborative process, frequent problem solving, and extraordinary patience.

Why School Stakeholders Begin to Collaborate

Numerous interviewees claimed that, for collaboration processes to be successful, all stakeholders must be motivated to change current relationships, practices, and policies that do not benefit students. This idea is consistent with a significant body of organizational change research suggesting that participatory planning is most successful when stakeholders become dissatisfied with the status quo and become aware of new organizational structures (Beer, 2007; Kotter, 1995). According to interviewees, increased commitment to collaboration was often triggered by changes in leadership, unanticipated legal decisions, or new partnerships. Approximately half of all interviewees described a change in district, board, or union leadership as the primary trigger for increased collaboration. Nearly half of all interviewees also said that unanticipated events, such as new legislative requirements and budget cuts, led to increased collaboration. Finally, nearly one-third of all interviewees reported that external partnerships, especially with nearby universities, strengthened early collaboration efforts.

Developing and Strengthening Labor-Management Collaboration

Interviewees described specific practices that strengthened both existing and emergent labor-management collaboration efforts.

Trust Building and Communication

Nearly all interviewees said trust is largely a product of effective formal and informal communications. For example, they cited the benefits of transparent budgetary information, advance notifications of meetings, and explicit ground rules for decision-making. Interviewees said trust was built when others followed through on promises; were clear about their interests and activities; and worked to maintain respectful, even personal, relationships. More informal, simple gestures like warm greetings, spontaneous discussions about minor problems, and shared meals away from the office were invaluable, according to many interviewees.



One district adopted the following understanding to promote trusting interactions:

We came up with an idea of “presumed trust” where we always presume that the other person is coming from a good place with good intentions, even if we initially disagree. This allows conversations to start in a different place. This really helped us to change the way we interact with each other.

Effective Leadership

According to the majority of interviewees, skilled leadership by labor and management is critical during the preliminary stage of collaboration and during particularly difficult periods of change or transition. Effective leaders demonstrate the ability to listen and actively foster opportunities for open communication; respond to conflict in respectful and productive ways; and remain flexible and patient. People need to “*feel* heard, not just be heard,” as one district leader put it. Effective leaders communicate an ethic of caring and support through genuine dialogue, an open-door policy, and personal interactions. These leaders also recognize that conflict will always be present even in successful collaboration, and they do not ignore, resent, or try to wish it away. Instead, they employ strategies to resolve difficult discussions, and they seek outside assistance when conflict threatens to derail collaborative efforts. Many districts strengthen and sustain collaboration by continuously cultivating collaborative leadership throughout the district.

A Shared Sense of Purpose

Successful labor-management groups focus on student success even if they do not always agree on how to get there. Stakeholders regularly enter into dialogue about goals for students, and leaders help them see how their work impacts these goals. In districts with strong collaboration, groups adopt this approach by signing and posting their student-centered commitments, visiting classrooms together, and starting and ending meetings with discussions about the relationship between student success and stakeholder collaboration. The stakeholders do not avoid bread and butter issues, such as employee compensation and benefits, but they constantly focus discussions on questions related to improved student learning.

Interest-Based Bargaining

Some districts with strong collaboration have replaced a position-based bargaining approach with one that is interest-based. Interest-based bargaining is designed to construct “win-win” outcomes where parties cooperate to develop more creative and mutually beneficial agreements based on mutual interests rather than predetermined positions. Stakeholders engaged in interest-based bargaining share information openly and discuss underlying interests to identify multiple solutions. For interest-based bargaining to be successful, stakeholders must be able to explore a wide range of issues and interests to identify creative options and integrate ideas (Duvall, 2009). One interviewee explained how they manage this process:

We schedule an initial round of three full days on neutral territory. We spend several hours just going over the process—it’s a challenge sometimes for people who are used to the traditional confrontational style of bargaining. We work people through exercises to help them understand that we go step-by-step to achieve consensus before drafting a document. We have a very explicit process, and we usually use two facilitators. We put issues on the table so all parties are aware of the information. We



usually pick the low-hanging fruit and work through it before tackling more difficult things. If an issue is a tough nut to crack, we'll form a subcommittee to work on it, but the issue always comes back to the full group.

External Assistance

Interviewees from districts that had experienced successful labor-management collaboration often stressed the role that neutral outside parties played in facilitating challenging discussions or sharing collaboration techniques. Interviewees from districts in early stages of collaboration often wanted assistance with relationship building even more than assistance on technical or contractual matters.

Summary

Although districts develop collaborative relationships in different ways, certain practices appear to strengthen labor-management collaboration regardless of the setting. Interviewees described strategies that foster trust and communication, cultivate collaborative leadership, support shared problem solving, and focus stakeholders on student-centered goals. Some district leaders also reported improved collaboration through interest-based bargaining and external assistance. Section 5 contains specific recommendations to strengthen labor-management collaboration.



Section 3: Barriers Affecting Effective Labor-Management Collaboration

While interviewees aspired to create an organizational culture characterized by trust, respect, and a focus on student learning, they frequently encountered barriers to achieving this more collaborative culture. Obstacles preventing the initiation of collaboration were often different from those that emerged during more advanced stages of collaboration.

Obstacles to the Initiation of Collaboration

Interviewees who said their districts were not yet ready to collaborate frequently characterized obstacles in one or more of the following three areas: negative perceptions of stakeholders and stakeholder interests; leadership shortcomings; and a lack of basic, but essential, resources.

Negative Perceptions of Stakeholders and Stakeholders' Interests

Numerous interviewees attributed initial collaboration problems to negative perceptions about other stakeholders. They recognized that entrenched, and often implicit, assumptions about other stakeholders perpetuated an “us-versus-them” mentality, and they stressed the need to build knowledge about other parties’ backgrounds and interests before jumping into more focused collaborative activities. One superintendent talked about addressing this need in the following way: “It’s critical to explore why teachers and managers think about each other in particular ways. We had to get it out in the open before we could move forward.” Nearly one-quarter of interviewees—including union leaders, school board members, and superintendents—struggled with anti-teacher or anti-education sentiments in their communities. One union leader described how this dynamic impacted school board members’ collaboration:

One of the biggest challenges is the community’s perception of unions. They love their teachers but do not like unions and do not see us as partners. An elected board of education is very sensitive to public perception. This may prevent certain board members from feeling comfortable enough to collaborate openly. This problem will take a lot of messaging at multiple levels to solve.

Some interviewees advocated helping all stakeholders to understand that the needs of teachers and students are deeply intertwined and rarely mutually exclusive.

Leadership Shortcomings

The majority of interviewees who talked about obstacles to establishing preliminary collaboration cited leadership challenges. In a few cases, they described superintendents, labor leaders, and school board leaders as openly hostile to the possibility of increased collaboration. These non-collaborative leaders exhibited poor listening skills and lacked the ability to inspire the enthusiasm and trust needed to initiate collaboration. These leaders were often perceived as having their “own agendas” and being inflexible. More frequently, interviewees said leaders were simply a “poor fit” for their districts, or they lacked the skills necessary to build a collaborative culture. Some respondents



suggested that an external, experienced facilitator was needed to diffuse tension and bring the parties to a shared understanding of others' experiences and interests. More experienced collaborators thought traditional leadership training did not provide district, school, and union leaders with the skills and knowledge necessary to create a culture of trust, respect, and collaboration. As one school board leader warned, "Don't embark on this just because you've read the book *Win/Win* or *Getting to Yes*. It requires a deep understanding of the process."

A Lack of Essential Resources

Interviewees cited resource limitations as a significant barrier across all stages of collaboration, but the impact was most pronounced for districts in the initial stages. Several interviewees identified insufficient time and competing demands as obstacles that prevented parties from attending conferences or holding retreats to build relationships, develop action plans, and make commitments to work together in new ways. Without adequate support for collaboration, the respondents were often unable to secure a neutral meeting place, take key employees off-site, hire substitute teachers and staff, and find and pay for experienced facilitators. One superintendent described the long-term challenge of collaboration this way:

Collaboration takes time. It's important to invest up front in building trust and relationships, and establishing common goals and interests. It feels slow, because people want to just dive in, but it takes six to eight months to really get on the same page—to educate one another about issues.

Barriers to Stronger, Sustained Collaboration

Even when districts have successfully initiated collaboration and have some history of working well together, there are barriers to strengthening and sustaining this collaboration. Interviewees cited a number of factors that impeded efforts to build stronger and more resilient professional relationships. Six factors were particularly prevalent:

Broken Promises and Lack of Transparency

Stakeholder groups often fail to discuss their interests and commitments openly. Several interviewees said they had been "blindsided" by another stakeholder's "hidden agenda" or sudden change of position on an issue. One superintendent believed his union counterpart was not actually committed to collaborating. Some interviewees said they had reached agreements in informal conversations, only to hear the other party promoting a different position in public.

Inability to Manage Conflict Effectively

According to most interviewees, stakeholders often lack the knowledge or skills to navigate difficult interactions. Interviewees conceded that conflict is unavoidable and could be beneficial in some cases, but they wanted to learn how to disagree without being unreasonable or hostile toward one another. As one labor leader explained, "I think we could all learn more about how to work with conflict. We're always going to be at odds on something. How do we keep this from impacting the ongoing collaboration and separate it from everything else we're doing?"



Changes in Leadership

Turnover among district or union leaders often disrupts collaboration efforts. Many interviewees reported spending significant time reestablishing collaborative commitments when a new leader was hired or elected. Some respondents also described problems that emerged when new leaders simply did not share the same commitment to collaboration. One interviewee reported this experience:

*Everyone who had a shred of interest in cooperation is gone. The new management wants to put its foot on the throat of teachers, paraprofessionals, and other staff so they can show us who's boss. And the person who controls our school board recently said, "Collaboration is bull****." Denver seems like an unfortunate missed opportunity.*

External Policy Changes

Legal proceedings, policy changes, and court decisions can halt collaboration. An interviewee expressed frustration over new legislation on teacher evaluations: "Now they've changed the rules so all of that good will has been put on hold. We've put in a substantial amount of time and money in another system, but where did that get us?" Several interviewees noted that when states pass legislation, it often removes local autonomy, shifts the balance of collective decision-making power, and increases tensions among labor and management.

Negative Influence by External Constituencies

Multiple interviewees told us that some city leaders or state union or administrator leaders had expressed antagonism towards collaborative approaches after the Denver conference. These external constituents had adopted adversarial or antagonistic postures, engaging in "nay-saving" or "backroom deals" that disrupted collaborative efforts and demoralized stakeholders.

Significant Budgetary Losses

Nearly all interviewees said the financial crisis and the uncertainty about future allocations had impacted the labor-management relationship, although in some cases budgetary challenges served as a powerful incentive to collaborate. More frequently, however, limited resources posed a formidable obstacle to building and maintaining collaborative relationships. Several superintendents said they lacked adequate resources to support collaboration, and some interviewees said promising new initiatives had never gotten off the ground because of unanticipated budget cuts.

Fatal Half-Measures

Some interviewees reported that modest steps to implement collaborative practices only increased the level of frustration. Poor implementation and a lack of tangible progress seemed to discourage stakeholders, causing some to blame the lack of progress on collaboration rather than on inadequate implementation.⁷ It appears that when districts implemented piecemeal or half-hearted labor-management collaboration, it might actually have done more harm than good.

⁷ According to Fixsen et al., (2007) poor results obtained from a new strategy are often due to poor implementation rather than the strategy itself.



Summary

Numerous factors pose challenges to effective labor-management collaboration. In the early stages, wariness of the process, an absence of trust, lack of experience with collaboration, and inadequate resources are common. Districts with experience in collaboration are particularly vulnerable to broken promises, lack of transparency, sudden changes in leadership, external policy changes, external influences, budget shortfalls, and poor implementation of collaborative strategies. Specific recommendations for addressing these barriers are detailed in Section 5.



Section 4: Technical Assistance to Advance Labor-Management Collaboration

Survey respondents and interviewees expressed an interest in several forms of technical assistance to support more effective and sustainable labor-management collaboration. The respondents were nearly unanimous in their view that technical assistance should be customized to local circumstances, resources, and needs. Many respondents, especially those just beginning to collaborate, were interested in more than traditional *technical* assistance offerings. They wanted help establishing a new culture of trust and transparency, which they saw as a necessary precondition for effective collaboration.

Survey respondents and interviewees voiced a clear preference for skilled, trusted facilitators who had knowledge of their district’s history, challenges, and interpersonal dynamics. As shown in Figure 3, survey respondents identified several types of technical assistance that would be useful.

Figure 3: Usefulness of Technical Assistance

Survey Question: Please indicate how useful technical assistance would be for your district in these areas.	Not Useful	Somewhat or Very Useful	Unsure
Collaborative efforts that directly improve student outcomes	6% (7)	88% (110)	6% (7)
Networking opportunities (e.g., district-to-district partnerships, conferences, webinars)	7% (8)	85% (106)	8% (10)
Improving organizational trust and communication.	10% (12)	80% (101)	10% (12)
Financial knowledge and budget transparency	18% (22)	76% (95)	6% (7)
Interest-based bargaining	23% (28)	64% (80)	13% (16)

Collaborative Efforts That Directly Improve Student Outcomes

Eighty-nine percent of survey respondents were interested in learning how their districts could focus their collaborative efforts on improved student outcomes, a promising sign that labor leaders and management want to move their conversations beyond compensation, benefits, and other “bread and butter” issues.



Networking Opportunities

Eighty-five percent of survey respondents indicated they would like more opportunities to network with other educators. A labor leader in a rural district remarked: “Reaching out to other communities to see how they solve problems and forming a collaboration across communities would be very helpful.” Interviewees said they would like to observe specific models, practices, and templates that their colleagues in other districts have successfully implemented in areas such as teacher evaluation, school improvement strategies, alternative compensation plans, and building district and communitywide support for labor-management collaboration.

Improving Organizational Trust and Communication

Underscoring the desire many leaders have to establish a culture that is hospitable to collaboration, 80 percent of survey respondents wanted external assistance that would improve organizational trust and communication. Specifically, they wanted help with conflict resolution, joint-leadership, and collaboration strategies. Several respondents wanted to learn how they could share information more effectively, particularly in areas such as teacher and school performance. Several individuals also expressed interest in strategies to improve public perceptions of teachers, unions, and the bargaining process.

Financial Knowledge and Budget Transparency

Seventy-six percent of survey respondents wanted to learn how they could achieve greater transparency and understanding of the budgeting process. Many interviewees said lack of confidence in the budget’s accuracy was a persistent distraction, creating unhealthy tensions and eroding trust. Virtually all interviewees said the recent budget crisis had dominated stakeholder discussions. As one school board leader noted, “When you spend all your time wondering about finance, you don’t spend time being innovative and gearing your work toward student achievement.”

Interest-Based Bargaining

Many interviewees said any help they might receive negotiating contracts in a more collaborative fashion would be helpful. Sixty-three percent of survey respondents expressed interest in interest-based bargaining to focus attention on common interests rather than opposing positions. One union leader remarked: “We’ve never done interest-based bargaining, and some people see it as ‘pie in the sky,’ saying it will never work. But, how [else] can we move forward if we are not thinking about agreements that benefit everyone?”

Fostering Collaborative Leadership

Several interviewees thought the collaborative skills of their districts’ administrators and teacher leaders could be strengthened. Leadership training could build trust and communication, improve decision-making processes, and build a culture in which collaboration would thrive.



Summary

Labor and management leaders want technical assistance in various areas, including budgets, leadership practices, and bargaining methods. Meaningful labor-management assistance is not only technical. Survey respondents and interviewees want assistance in building more trusting, supportive, and innovative district cultures. They want to interact with skilled facilitators who can help build collegial relationships and opportunities to network with other successful districts. Specific recommendations for external assistance are provided in Section 5.



Section 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The 12 presenting districts featured at the Denver conference provide strong evidence that labor-management collaboration can improve students' academic outcomes. Through collaborative partnerships, these districts have adopted cutting-edge evaluation systems and innovative programs to strengthen instruction and leadership; boosted learning time for students and collaboration time for teachers; and crafted new, student-centered policies on teacher assignments, transfers, and workforce reductions.

These same districts are used over and over as exemplars of effective labor-management collaboration, because the number of districts that practice this collaboration remains small. Until last year's Denver conference, no large-scale national or statewide initiatives have supported expanding labor-management collaboration.

This study's findings show that such support is vital given the extraordinary challenges districts must overcome in adopting this approach. Districts in the early stage of collaboration require high levels of trust and communication. Stakeholders must adopt different leadership styles and a new mindset that the "other side" is a partner, not an adversary. Collaboration requires considerably more time—a commodity that is often in short supply—for leaders to meet, research options, problem solve, and develop buy-in from stakeholder groups. And powerful individuals—both inside and outside the district—can undermine efforts to change, especially in the fragile beginning stages.

The change that is required is nothing short of a change in district culture: the beliefs, norms, assumptions, and habits of every individual and group. Even though the current culture may not be working in many districts, its familiarity is comforting to some people. Change is risky. Things could get worse; people could lose power. A key reason for the Denver conference's success is that leaders were able to see what labor-management collaboration looks like, hearing and interacting with leaders in similar roles who took risks and are succeeding.

If labor-management collaboration is to become the rule and not the exception in America's school districts, new support systems are necessary. Districts will need access to networks in their regions so they can learn about collaborative strategies and obtain prompt assistance from nearby educators who have faced similar challenges. The regional satellites of the Teachers Union Reform Network have provided such support on a small scale for several years, and recent Gates Foundation funding has enabled them to expand this work. Districts will also need support that is not yet widely available, like customized technical assistance from experienced experts, and leadership development for school board members, district office personnel, and labor leaders. Furthermore, additional research must be conducted to ensure districts have ready access to a rich and expanding knowledge base of effective collaboration practices, sample contract language, memoranda of understanding, and informal agreements that are associated with improved academic performance.

This study's findings have led to the following specific recommendations for conference planners, district and labor leaders, and technical assistance providers.



Recommendations for Conference Planners

Survey and interview data suggest that the Denver labor-management conference achieved several important goals. Most respondents appreciated the event’s structure and content, and they made considerable progress on collaboration after they returned home. They also provided insights into ways future labor-management conferences can provide even greater value to district and union leaders. Below are six recommendations for conference organizers planning future events:

Broaden participation to other stakeholder groups—Invite leaders from state-level organizations that represent school boards, teacher unions, administrators, and families and provide presentations that will enable them to support labor-management collaboration.

Include presentations from a more diverse set of districts—Ensure balanced participation from urban, suburban, and rural districts as well as large and small districts. Identify and invite presenters from districts involved in various stages of collaboration (i.e., not yet ready, preliminary, and advanced stages of collaboration).

Present background on the early stages of district collaboration—Ask presenters to describe the events and actions that enabled them to collaborate in the first place. Consider inviting former superintendents, union leaders, or board members to talk about the triggers and barriers involved with the initiation of labor-management collaboration.

Provide more time for facilitated dialogue and planning—Provide ample time for districts to set goals and develop detailed action plans. Use facilitators to guide this process and allow districts to obtain feedback on their plans from other district leaders.

Provide districts with post-conference support and resources—Ensure that districts have the necessary support to implement their action plans effectively and a way to share progress, raise questions, and obtain support. Establish a clearinghouse to disseminate research and other resources on labor-management collaboration.

Implement networking strategies—Coordinate conference calls, online meetings, and regional face-to-face meetings that will maintain connections between conference participants. Encourage districts to integrate these networking opportunities with local collaboration events and initiatives.⁸

Recommendations for District Labor and Management Leaders

Labor-management collaboration is shaped by a range of factors related to organizational resources, interpersonal relationships, external policies, and political interests. Interviewees spoke about being caught up in larger systemic problems that prevented them from focusing on agreements that affect student learning. Because collaboration is complex and challenging, it will be most successful where

⁸ The Teachers Union Reform Network (TURN), whose mission is “...to expand the scope of collective bargaining to include instructional and professional issues,” works with districts that want additional support for their collaboration efforts. TURN’s regional satellites meet regularly throughout the year and welcome labor-management teams (teachers, local teacher unions, district administrators, and board members) who want to participate.



stakeholders have access to effective collaboration practices and high-quality external assistance. Although this report does not provide a formal model for successful labor-management collaboration, it offers a number of promising practices for districts working to establish or strengthen collaboration. The following recommendations for district labor and management leaders are based on survey responses and interviews:

Bring all key stakeholders to the table to focus on student learning—Devote time to do joint planning and schedule meetings to ensure broad-based participation in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of student-centered initiatives. Establish norms to guide stakeholder interactions.

Seek external assistance to assess needs and address tough problems—Partner with a neutral third party who possesses knowledge of local issues and who will assess the needs that must be met for successful collaboration. Ensure consensus on the selection and role of the third-party consultant and treat the consultant as a collaborative partner rather than an external entity.

Seek out formal and informal opportunities to increase trust—Hold formal working retreats or offsite meetings about less contentious topics of mutual interest. Support informal opportunities for dialogue; make time for social events outside of the normal work environment to strengthen trust and create opportunities for informal networking and problem solving.

Cultivate collaborative leadership districtwide—Work together to identify critical collaborative leadership skills and participate in joint-leadership training opportunities. Incorporate collaborative leadership expectations into administrative recruitment and union election processes. Extend collaborative leadership training to schools throughout the district, and provide new leaders with a labor-management collaboration orientation.

Foster productive and respectful dialogue—Work together to develop and document norms, ground rules, and procedures for speaking about difficult topics. Consider working with a neutral third party to identify best practices for addressing conflict. Make collaborative agreements and norms visible to a wide range of stakeholders.

Share and document stakeholder interests and concerns—Take the time to document important ideas, decisions, and agreements and provide regular updates to constituents. Continue to take regular meeting notes and formalize agreements, even when trust is high and collaboration is strong.

Seek training and coaching for interest-based bargaining—Identify external assistance related to interest-based bargaining and make sure to proceed only if and when all parties agree on the new bargaining approach. Turn to other districts that have successfully implemented interest-based bargaining for ideas and recommendations.

Help external constituencies learn about labor-management collaboration—Coordinate labor-management events for stakeholders to learn about other districts' successful practices. Develop formal collaborative commitments with external constituencies (i.e., city leaders, regional union representatives) whenever possible.



Avoid fatal half-measures and implement systemic solutions—Develop new plans and initiatives only after jointly analyzing the problems, consulting with network partners, and carefully considering relevant research. Develop and implement a detailed action plan and proceed when there is the capacity to be successful. Monitor implementation frequently and intervene early when difficulties arise.

Recommendations for Technical Assistance Providers

Survey respondents and interviewees voiced a strong interest in technical assistance, and they recommended numerous design strategies, such as onsite needs assessments by trusted third parties, coaching, regional conferences, and ongoing activities with network partners. In many cases, technical assistance was described as a distinctly local challenge requiring a customized approach. Respondents from smaller districts spoke frequently about the benefits of peer learning opportunities and highly customized “train-the-trainer” models of technical assistance. Specific recommendations for technical assistance providers include:

Assess the strengths and weaknesses of local collaboration practices—Conduct a comprehensive assessment of collaboration needs and identify factors that directly or indirectly impact student learning. Identify district and community assets that can be leveraged to increase collaboration.

Envision and build a districtwide culture of collaboration and trust—Help districts establish basic norms to guide professional interactions; and help build trust that will emerge slowly after stakeholders commit to these norms, monitor progress, and see evidence that the norms have been followed.

Create new opportunities for more personal and informal interactions—Help district leaders structure safe conversations around previously undiscussable topics. Help identify important ground rules and procedures for addressing unanticipated conflicts.

Tap into local knowledge and experience—Customize external assistance to address local interests and challenges. Encourage local consultants to participate wherever possible, and non-local experts should take adequate time to understand local issues.

Develop key leadership skills for collaboration—Provide leadership training and coaching opportunities. Focus assistance on topics such as effective meeting facilitation, stakeholder engagement strategies, conflict resolution, and collaborative negotiation strategies.

Identify, select, and implement effective collaboration practices—Provide appropriate options and establish network partners who can provide ongoing mutual support, because selecting collaboration strategies is a daunting task, and local stakeholders with little experience should not have to invent their own.

Initiate and maintain constructive dialogue with external constituents—Help stakeholders interact positively with external constituents, including community organizations and state organizations that represent unions, administrators, parents, and school boards. Help to initiate and



facilitate meetings, if necessary, and share information about labor-management collaboration benefits.

Obtain funding or other resources, such as time, to strengthen collaboration—Help set priorities and seek resources, after assessing needs, so that districts have the time and resources to identify and adopt new practices.



Appendix – Methodology

Data for this study were obtained through an online survey, conducted by WestEd, of the superintendents, labor leaders, and school board presidents who participated in the Denver conference, as well as in-depth, follow-up telephone interviews with a portion of the survey respondents.

In February 2012, approximately one year after the conference, WestEd researchers sent email messages to 478 superintendents, labor leaders, and school board presidents representing 150 school districts that participated in the conference.⁹ With 62 emails returned as “undeliverable,” we assume that 416 individuals received our invitation to participate in the survey. Of those who likely received the invitation, 151 people, or 36 percent, participated in the survey. Twenty-two of these respondents were from districts that presented at the conference. We did not include their responses in our analysis of the conference’s value, but we included them in our analyses of factors that can affect collaboration and technical assistance needs.¹⁰ We received a relatively balanced distribution of responses from district labor leaders (39 percent), district superintendents (34 percent), and board presidents (27 percent). Survey questions focused on stakeholders’ conference experiences, post-conference collaboration progress, and technical assistance interests. We also asked survey respondents whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview about their labor-management collaboration experiences. Approximately 120 respondents expressed a willingness to participate in these interviews.

In selecting individuals for telephone interviews, we sent emails to over half of all survey respondents who had agreed to participate in the study’s second phase. The pool of interview candidates represented a balanced distribution of labor leaders, superintendents, and board presidents from small, suburban, and large school districts. Some interview questions differed based on the interviewees’ survey responses. For example, interviewees who reported a lack of readiness to collaborate were asked about obstacles to collaboration, while interviewees who reported strong collaboration were asked about factors that helped them achieve and maintain their current level of success. Researchers used descriptive statistical analyses on survey responses to reveal trends and content analysis to identify themes across responses to specific interview questions.

⁹ Most districts sent three individuals. Districts making presentations at the conference sent more than three.

¹⁰ Conference presenters did not attend breakout sessions or meet as teams to debrief and develop action plans.



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