Building Leadership Capacity in California's Public Education Systems:

Lessons From the SCALE Initiative

Joel Knudson

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AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH®

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Introduction

Educators and other stakeholders in the education field increasingly have recognized the power of school systems—both traditional public school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs)—to create the conditions for student success in our public schools. School and classroom interventions, education policies, funding streams, and collaborative networks frequently address school systems as critical levers for change. Indeed, a growing set of cross-district collaborative networks both recognizes and seeks to capitalize on the power of districts in effecting change for students.[1] Although these approaches to improvement appropriately recognize the importance of districts and CMOs, they rarely focus on the capacity of system leaders themselves.

The Stuart Foundation California Leaders in Education (SCALE) Initiative is an effort to build the individual leadership capacity of system leaders in several of California's traditional public school districts and CMOs. The initiative builds on the premise that in order to create school systems that maximize student success, the superintendents and chief executive officers (CEOs) leading those systems need to learn from best practices and from one another to build their individual skills. In addition to critical efforts to improve student learning opportunities, one system leader explained, "We also need to make sure that we're making an investment in the individuals who are carrying out the work." To do this, 14 individuals have partnered with teams from Bain & Company and California Education Partners to engage in a series of workshops designed to build their leadership capacity.

This report documents the history and evolution of the SCALE Initiative through 2014. It tells the story of how the work began, what it entails, and how it has developed across time. The report also identifies lessons learned from the SCALE experience. These lessons can inform the participants of the initiative itself as they continue their work together, as well as other educators who might seek to create similar learning and networking opportunities to improve their own systems.

The report draws on three primary data sources. The first is a set of interviews conducted in late spring and early summer 2014 with the active participants in the SCALE Initiative, including all active system leaders and representatives from both Bain & Company and California Education Partners. (See Appendix A for a complete list of interviewees.) The second data source is direct observation of three of the group's six workshops that took place in 2013 and 2014. The third data source is a document review from early planning conversations among initiative participants and from each of the six workshops, including prereading materials, tools, slide presentations, and products from the workshops of the participants' work together.

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[1] Some examples within the state of California include the California Collaborative on District Reform (www.cacollaborative.org), the California Office to Reform Education (http://coredistricts.org), the Stanford English Language Learner Leadership Network (http://www.ellnetwork.org/), and the Urban Education Dialogue (http://pricephilanthropies.org/tag/urban-education-dialogue/).

The pages that follow address several questions key to understanding the SCALE Initiative. (1) What is the history of the initiative? What does it look like, and how has it evolved? (2) How do participants describe their experience with the SCALE Initiative? (3) What elements of the initiative have been the most effective? (4) What elements of the initiative have posed the greatest challenges? (5) What lessons can we learn from the SCALE Initiative? In answering these questions, this report can inform the broader field of education stakeholders about ways in which school system leaders can best contribute to student success.

What Is the Story of the SCALE Initiative?

The SCALE Initiative developed organically, beginning with an initial trip of education leaders to Toronto, Ontario, in May 2012 and evolving into a series of workshops conducted by Bain & Company in 2013–14, all focused on developing individual leadership capacity for CEOs and superintendents of a group of California CMOs and traditional public school districts.

Trip to Ontario

In May 2012, the Stuart Foundation sponsored a learning trip to Ontario for members of its board and key leaders from California's K–12 education system. The Stuart Foundation board had been exploring statewide system reform for several years and had targeted investments in several California districts and CMOs that it believed could be high leverage points for educational improvement. The Ontario trip was an opportunity for the board to learn from a large system that had demonstrated considerable growth in student performance during a relatively short period of time. Foundation leaders also saw it as an opportunity for the superintendents and CEOs of Stuart-supported districts and CMOs to learn from another environment and to provide feedback to board members about whether and how lessons might apply to the California context.

The education system leaders who attended the trip described the value of not only learning from the Ontario context but also interacting with one another. As a representative from the Stuart Foundation observed, "What we saw during the trip and I think what people experienced—and some of them hadn't met each other at all—was a lot of sharing of common approaches. Clearly there were some structural things, but there was a lot that they really had a lot of common values and interests in meeting the needs of their kids." To capitalize on the power of this initial learning experience, the Stuart Foundation agreed to support additional conversations among the participating superintendents and CEOs to craft ways in which they could extend the learning and networking opportunity.

Subsequent Planning Sessions

Two planning sessions, one in September 2012 and one in December 2012, enabled the system leaders to explore ways in which they might move forward. These early brainstorming sessions led to a shared understanding that, as system leaders, the individuals in the room needed to build their own leadership skills to meet the needs of their systems most effectively and that value existed in embarking on that process together. As one system leader explained, "Our job is to fill everybody else's buckets, so we had better make sure our bucket is full too. There is a lot we have to learn as leaders to empower those we lead and to build the capacity of those we lead."

The brainstorming sessions also produced a list of potential speakers who could help the group think through some of the key issues confronting educational leaders. Names included experts in organizational management, notable politicians, and prominent education leaders. The group realized, however, that they needed someone to facilitate the sessions. California Education Partners committed to organizing and managing the group's work together and continued to play that role throughout the life of the SCALE Initiative. In addition, one system leader had worked with the management consulting firm Bain & Company prior to entering public education and volunteered to reach out to contacts within the organization to gauge their interest. Bain agreed to facilitate a workshop for the group, an arrangement that became a two-year commitment in which it hosted six workshops in 2013 and 2014.

Leadership Workshops

In 2013 and 2014, organizers from California Education Partners worked closely with Bain representatives to design a series of workshops focused on organizational leadership skills and strategies. The meetings took place during the course of two days—with a group dinner held on the evening of the first day—in Bain offices in Los Angeles or San Francisco.[2] In 2013, the meetings happened in pairs, with a first set of meetings in February and March and second set in October and November. In 2014, the group met twice, once in April and once in November. The entire range of meetings, including dates and primary focus, is as follows:

- February 2013: Decision-Driven Organizations
- March 2013: The Case for Change and Effective Organizations
  October 2013: Resilience and School Leadership Pipelines
- November 2013: Communication and School Leadership Pipelines Continued
- April 2014: Content Review and Decision Effectiveness
- November 2014: Decision Effectiveness and School Leadership

The meetings themselves introduced content to participants and enabled them to interact with that content through a variety of information sources and opportunities for engagement. Bain provided presession readings that introduce participants to the concepts the group explores in the sessions. In addition, Bain brought in experts from within and outside the organization to introduce particular strategies or bodies of research that were relevant to a workshop's focus. These opportunities frequently began with a formal presentation of some sort—often incorporating research findings and lessons from organizations in the private sector—with ample opportunity for discussion among participants. They usually continued with opportunities for application of content to participants' own contexts. Sometimes this took place through connections to data that Bain collected through interviews within the participants' systems. Other times it included opportunities to try new strategies in the context of a concrete problem CMOs and districts are confronting in public education.

Beyond the broader format, the workshops featured modes of presentation and interaction that several participants connected to features of high-quality instruction. Each meeting began with an overview of

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[2] Participants of the SCALE Initiative have since committed to continue working together beyond 2014.

the group's goals and norms and a review of the content from the previous meeting, which enabled the group to access prior knowledge. Extensive interaction among participants further allowed participants to make meaning of new content and actively engage in the learning process. Participants also had an opportunity to share any ways in which they applied what they learned when they returned to their own systems, facilitating the transfer of new ideas. The opportunities for application, facilitated through the guidance and interpretation of Bain leaders, enabled participants to forge connections between new bodies of knowledge and the challenges that exist within their own contexts.

To illustrate the ways in which the workshops unfold and the Bain team led participants through different ways of learning and applying new concepts, the following examples describe the group's work across time in two categories that received repeated attention across multiple workshops: crafting messages and increasing decision-making effectiveness within an organization. The examples are not comprehensive and do not capture the depth of conversations or the connections that facilitators and participants made with other workshop topics or the work in their own contexts. Nevertheless, they demonstrate ways in which the workshops have introduced material in multiple formats, created opportunities for participants to apply their learning, and spiraled workshop activities across time to reinforce and deepen participant understanding.

Crafting Messages

When the SCALE group first met with Bain in February 2013, workshop facilitators provided an overview of Bain's philosophy regarding decision-driven organizations and introduced several principles and tools that would emerge again during the course of the group's work together. Among the areas of focus they addressed, the Bain team presented evidence that the process of communication plays a crucial role in building commitment for change efforts. Facilitators also identified several features of effective message content and effective messengers during times of change.

In November 2013, the group returned to issues of change communication. This time, researchers from Bridgespan joined the workshop to share findings from a study they conducted on state-level implementation of the Common Core State Standards—a topic of particular interest to the system leaders in the SCALE Initiative because of their ongoing efforts to transition to the new standards. The Bridgespan team compared successes it observed in Kentucky with some of the struggles that emerged in New York and attributed many of the differences to the approach each state took to communicating about change to various stakeholder groups. Facilitators then connected the Bridgespan research to participants' experiences by sharing examples of the SCALE Initiative's system leaders describing the new standards (collected during a set of phone calls prior to the meeting). Although the leaders were knowledgeable about the content and spoke accurately about the Common Core, meeting facilitators illustrated the ways in which jargon and verbosity can make these descriptions confusing to parents, other stakeholders, and members of the general public.

After the Bridgespan presentation, a representative from the Center for Risk Communication introduced the group to a body of evidence that describes the limited processing capacity that humans have in high-stress situations and times of change. In recognition of biological constraints to effective communication, he introduced tools for the group to use in crafting messages in 27 words or fewer, nine

seconds or less, and three main ideas. Participants then had an opportunity to apply their learning by working in small groups to craft messages about the importance of the Common Core for use in their own communities.

At the next workshop, held in April 2014, the group returned to the topic of crafting messages around change. Facilitators engaged participants' prior knowledge by reviewing the research underlying change communication efforts and the process the group went through in their previous meeting. System leaders then had an opportunity to apply their learning again and reinforce the tools they had developed by working in small groups to identify a new set of messages around the changes that parents should expect as California transitions to a new set of state summative assessments.

Increasing Decision-Making Effectiveness

The first workshop in February 2013 also enabled the Bain team to expose participants to a tool, known as *RAPID*, designed to guide effective decision making. Bain operates on a fundamental belief in high-quality decision making. As a Bain representative explained in a later workshop, "Decision making drives organizational effectiveness….That is the underpinning of our organization." Facilitators also explained that establishing clarity around individuals' roles is critical to avoiding dysfunction and undermining effective and efficient decisions. They therefore introduced a framework—organized by the acronym *RAPID*—during the group's initial meeting that seeks to make explicit each person's role in a particular decision-making process:

- **R**ecommend: Recommend a decision or action
- **A**gree: Formally agree to a recommendation; must be consulted, and should not be ignored
- **P**erform: Be accountable for performing a decision once made
- **I**nput: Provide input into a recommendation; must be consulted, but may be ignored
- **D**ecide: Make a final decision; commit the organization to action

In April 2014, the group returned to examine the topic of decision effectiveness in greater depth. The Bain team asked participants to read an overview from the *Harvard Business Review*[3] about RAPID and then went into greater depth during the workshop itself about the evidence base on decision-making effectiveness and the need for role clarity. Extensive dialogue among participants and facilitators sought to unpack what each role entails and where it falls in the decision-making process. In particular, conversation drew out some of the challenges and potential areas of tension that exist in applying the RAPID tool in the context of public education systems. For example, stakeholders may have a difference of opinion about whether true decision-making authority rests with the superintendent or CEO or with the system's school board. Through the conversation, however, the group began to develop an understanding of how leaders can use the tool to develop clarity within their own teams about how decisions take place and what the responsibility is for each team member in the process.

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[3] Rogers, P., & Blenko, M. W. (2006). Who has the D? How clear decision roles enhance organizational performance. *Harvard Business Review (84)*1, 52 –61. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2006/01/who-has-the-d-how-clear-decision-roles-enhance-organizational-performance

The group's November 2014 workshop again circled back on the topic of decision making and use of the RAPID tool. Bain facilitators reintroduced the tool and the principles on which it rests, and participants—many armed with the experience of having applied it in their own systems—contributed their observations and struggles to the conversation. The group then turned to review the results of a survey on decision effectiveness that Bain administered in nine of the participants' systems in fall 2014. Bain facilitators first led participants through aggregate survey results, comparing the average of the SCALE systems with their findings from a range of organizations in the private sector. This presentation highlighted not only overall measures of effectiveness but also discrepancies that existed from leaders' own perceptions of their systems and the perceptions of their second-line leadership. Group discussion allowed participants to pose questions to the Bain team and reflect on the survey results. Each participant then had an opportunity to review the survey results from their own system confidentially with a member of the Bain team, during which they could reflect on comparisons between their system and the group average, as well as ways in which current approaches to decision making might contribute to the results Bain shared. Through this exercise, participants were able to apply lessons from the broader body of knowledge that Bain introduced to their own specific circumstances.

Evolution Across Time

During the course of two years, the format of the workshops remained largely unchanged. The group continued to use the two-day meeting structure, with content designed in collaboration between the Bain team and California Education Partners on the basis of input from the participants themselves. Scheduling challenges led the group to hold only two workshops in 2014, fewer than the four held in 2013 and fewer than the original plans outlined. In addition, meeting planners elected to shorten the second day of each meeting after observing that participants often left the second day early. This decision led to mixed results; when the meeting ends earlier, participants often left even earlier, often to catch a flight or meet other professional obligations.

A second point of evolution took place with the group's membership. The invitation for participation originally was extended to each of the superintendents involved in the California Office to Reform Education (CORE), the executive director of CORE, and the CEOs of four California-based CMOs. Among the 14 school systems whose leaders have participated in the SCALE Initiative, the CEO or superintendent transitioned out of his or her role in seven of the systems during the life of the initiative. California Education Partners extended an invitation for each leader's successor to join the initiative, thus introducing changes to the group's composition. This decision had implications for participants' working together; a discussion of challenges later in the report explores these implications in more detail.

Distinguishing Characteristics

The SCALE Initiative offers an opportunity for education system leaders to collaborate with and learn from one another in potentially powerful ways, but it is not the only cross-system networking opportunity that exists. The superintendents in the group in particular have increasingly embraced cross-district collaboration as a mechanism for system improvement; networks such as CORE, the California Collaborative on District Reform, and the Urban Education Dialogue already create forums for

relationship building and system learning. The group's CEOs also have opportunities to work with peers through regionally based events or networks of grantees. In their interviews, however, participants identified some of the key characteristics that distinguish SCALE from these other learning opportunities.

The first and most frequently addressed feature that distinguishes the SCALE Initiative is the combination of leaders from CMOs and traditional public schools. Because the governance structures are distinct, and because interactions between districts and charter organizations so frequently become battles about educational philosophies or limited resources, regular learning opportunities among peers from different sectors rarely takes place. As one participant attested, "Very rarely do we as leaders get to sit in a safe place, go over those issues, and talk together with a common purpose. Usually when district leaders and charter leaders are talking, it's antagonistic because it's in some sort of board setting or something is wrong." Indeed, interview respondents described this feature as one of the key strengths of the initiative; a discussion of initiative participants later in the report explores this issue in more detail.

A second distinguishing characteristic of the initiative is the focus on *individual* leadership skills. Many existing networks seek to build *system* capacity to navigate key educational challenges. The deliberate incorporation of administrators and teachers throughout the district in an organization such as CORE, for example, is an effort to extend learning opportunities throughout a district for maximum impact on students. The SCALE Initiative also seeks to build system capacity, but it does so with an emphasis on the knowledge and skills that individuals need to lead their systems. One system leader described the difference by explaining, "I would say of all four [of the cross-system networks in which I participate], I've had more targeted productive conversations about the work I do in the Stuart sessions….It's really helped support me in my personal leadership and thinking about district leadership probably more than any of the others."

Finally, participants described the group's size and consistency in membership as key features that set the SCALE Initiative apart from other opportunities. Because the group is small, everyone has frequent opportunities for active engagement in the workshops. Consistency in membership also means that relationships develop and deepen across time, strengthening the quality of interactions among participants. These features also emerge in a discussion of initiative strengths later in the report.

Bain Motivation

Beyond the distinguishing characteristics of the learning opportunities, Bain's involvement with education system leaders is a unique role for all involved. Bain has built an education practice over time and has committed to working with the SCALE Initiative on a pro bono basis, but the nature of the work—taking on the workshop format rather than a consulting role with an individual organization—is a departure even from the organization's typical involvement with education. Bain representatives talked about their motivation to become involved in the initiative. One described the opportunity to contribute to the broader social good, saying, "We are just trying to figure out how we can have the maximum possible impact on student achievement as a way of giving back." A colleague expressed a similar

sentiment and extended the connection to employee satisfaction and even recruiting top talent to the organization:

> "One of the things that our people really care about is social impact….But we ask a lot of our people and they work really, really hard. So one of the things that we want to do is make them happy and one of the things they really care about, we all care about, is social impact."

By providing access to top leaders in California's education sphere and creating an opportunity to build leadership capacity, the SCALE Initiative creates the space for Bain to make a difference.

How Do Participants Describe Their Experience With the SCALE Initiative?

Participants uniformly describe the SCALE Initiative as a powerful experience that has impacted their leadership practice in positive ways. Some illustrative quotes from participants speak to the group's sentiments:

> "It has uniformly been agreed upon that [these are] some of the best experiences we've had as a group professionally in California."

> "The last thing on my schedule I want to miss is this. I mean, they're that important. I would miss everything else on my annual calendar except these."

> "As system leaders, we rarely get an opportunity to have a space where we can confidentially but unvarnishedly [sic] share our challenges and support each other in building capacity to overcome the challenges. It's a PLC [professional learning community] in the truest sense of the word."

Impact Takes a Variety of Forms

Participant responses suggest that the SCALE Initiative has influenced their leadership practice in a variety of ways. Multiple leaders describe the experience as having inspired informal reflection about their approach to their role. As one system leader explained, "I think it has forced me to be more reflective regarding my leadership role and filter some things through a different lens." Responses such as this point to an indirect role of the initiative, one that informs the perspectives and thought processes of participating leaders.

Participants also provided multiple examples of a more direct influence, of cases in which they took tools from the workshops or data about their systems directly back to their senior management teams. For example, some leaders brought the RAPID tool for decision making (described on page 5) to their cabinet to help develop clarity around decision-making roles and processes. Others brought back guidelines for communicating in times of change to work with their leadership teams on crafting messages about the Common Core, new assessment efforts, and other major system developments. One leader even described going through this process with the school board, and another did the same with the teacher union. Leaders also described taking ideas back that did not revolve around specific

tools. For example, one system abandoned their original approach to hosting a town hall meeting to communicate about upcoming changes and instead designed an open house in which parents and other stakeholders had an opportunity to access information in a more personalized and interactive way.

Some respondents also leveraged work that originated in the SCALE context to expand improvement efforts within their own systems. One leader, for example, used survey results provided by the Bain team to a secure a grant from the Wallace Foundation to support leadership development within the school system. Another participant described the workshop on risk communication as helpful in identifying some of the broader communication challenges confronting the school system. That system subsequently reached out to the representative from the Center for Risk Communication to commission a communications audit for the system; system leaders subsequently have used those results to reconsider and redesign the ways in which they interact with school staff, parents, and the broader community.

Different Tools Resonate Differently

Participant descriptions of their experiences with the SCALE Initiative indicate that the tools and strategies Bain has introduced resonate to different degrees for different participants. The RAPID tool that has grounded multiple leadership teams' approaches to decision making did not stand out in interview responses as especially influential for all participants. The hands-on practice in delivering messages around change was illuminating for some participants, but it did not connect as being consistent with the ways in which other leaders were most comfortable communicating. This difference stated, participants did not describe the differential levels of usefulness of tools and strategies as a weakness of the experience. Rather, they recognized that each individual comes to the sessions from a particular system context and with a particular set of skills and patterns of behavior. That connections develop in different ways for different members of the group is simply the nature of the work.

Participant Reflections Affirm the Value of Bain's Commitment

Bain facilitators routinely collected feedback from participants as an established component of the workshops. In most cases, respondent reports in their individual interviews echoed stories and reflections that they already had shared with the group in the workshops themselves. Participants' stories in the workshops may serve an important accountability purpose for group members: If the expectation exists for individuals to share the ways in which they have applied their learning, they may be more likely to seek opportunities for change when they return to their home context. Bain interview responses suggest, however, that the reports from participants also affirm that Bain's involvement in the initiative is worthwhile. As one facilitator shared, "One of the more rewarding things is to see how quickly this group has taken what they've learned and applied it in their organizations and used it to create what we hope are better outcomes in their districts." Another organizer echoed this sentiment and connected it to validating the Bain investment of time and resources: "When you see people actually taking the tools that they're learning and applying them to build something, to me, that's a success….It's worth putting the time in to plan these things because people are getting something out of them."

What Elements of the SCALE Initiative Have Been Most Effective?

Participant responses suggest that the SCALE Initiative has played an important role in improving their own leadership practices, but what makes it successful? Interviews suggest that four interrelated components of the SCALE Initiative have contributed to its success (see Exhibit 1). The first is the participants themselves, the set of California education system leaders who have participated in the Bain workshops. The second is the workshop facilitators, the experts from Bain who have designed and led the workshops to develop leadership skills. The third is the content of the workshops, including the research, tools, and strategies related to leading large organizations, as well as the data Bain has collected on each of the systems. These three elements—participants, facilitators, and content—draw strength from their interaction with one another, as well as with a critical fourth component—a set of norms for engagement that positions the group's work for success.

Exhibit 1. Elements of the SCALE Initiative That Contribute to Its Effectiveness

Participants

Norms for Engagement

Facilitators   Content
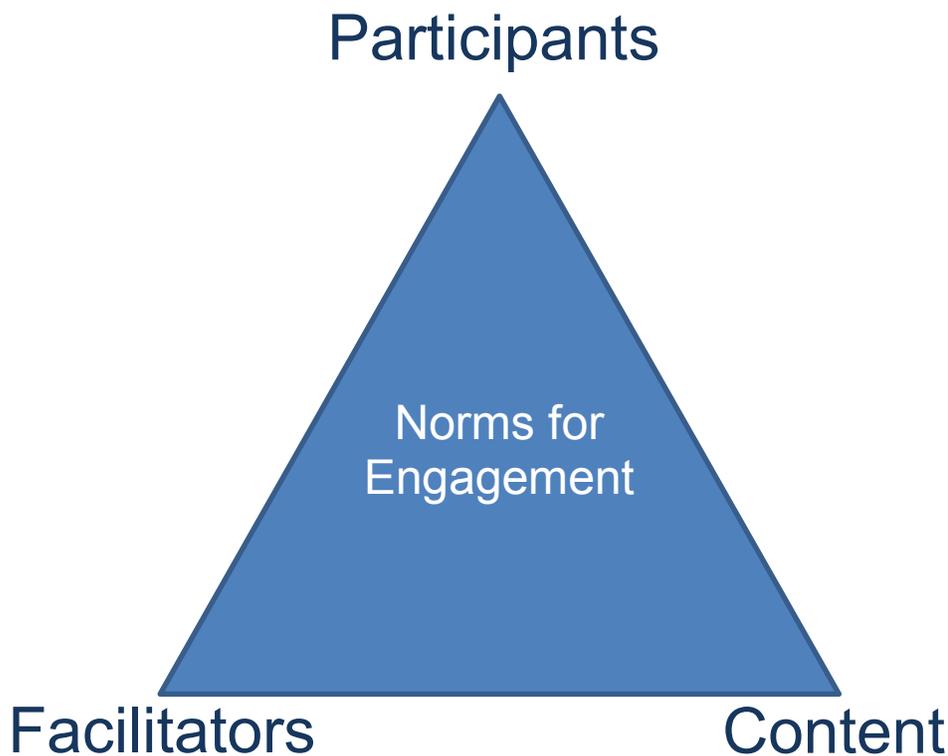
Participants

The first factor contributing to the successes that interview respondents described is the initiative participants themselves—the 14 education system leaders participating in the Bain workshops. The people in the room enhance the learning opportunities for their peers by sharing their perspectives, experiences, best practices, and struggles. This sharing, in turn, allows others to expand their understanding beyond their own systems to see other approaches to navigating shared challenges. Some interview responses also suggested that power exists in seeing the way that others in the room

respond to new information. As one leader described, "I think you glean really deeper understandings because sometimes what someone else shares will challenge your own belief or understanding and it forces you to ask the question: Did I miss something? Am I not thinking deeply enough? Did I fail to make a connection?"

In addition to learning from other systems' approaches and other individuals' perspectives, participants also emphasized that who is in the room matters. Respondents spoke highly of the caliber of the education leaders in the room, as well as the value in interacting with others who share their role as the head of an education system. One participant stated, "Sometimes it's just helpful to realize you're not the only one that's dealing with this. You're not alone in this." Another leader shared a similar perspective:

> "You feel very alone, generally, leading an organization through those dynamics. Knowing that there are other people that think like you that are good people, that are facing the same struggle, makes you feel a little bit better. So that's a value, and there [is] some cross-pollination of ideas and stuff that is good."

The peer-to-peer interaction, then, may extend beyond the sharing of information to facilitating a kind of support network.

One of the elements of the SCALE Initiative that distinguishes it from other cross-system learning opportunities, and one that nearly every respondent mentioned, is the opportunity to work with leaders from both CMOs and traditional public school districts. CMO-district relationships are often adversarial and involve political battles about access to resources and philosophies about public education. They frequently focus on the many differences between governance structures in schools. Participant observations, however, suggest that the commonality among individuals from different groups is one of the initiative's strengths. As one leader reflected, "What binds us together in the room is the deep desire to do right by all kids and do it as fast as they possibly can." Another shared, "We're all kind of struggling with the same issues here. Everyone in that room, there's a strong equity focus. People are focused on kids in need, kids of color, kids of poverty and making sure that we serve them well. So that's a shared moral imperative that brings us together."

Interview responses further suggest that beyond a shared purpose, the diverse perspectives of CMO and district leaders enhance the quality of the group's work together. One CMO leader described the unique learning opportunity afforded by the initiative: "I do lack, completely, the ability to be in the same room with traditional district superintendents….I would sign up [for continued work with this group] regardless of what objective we pick. I'd sign up to stay because I think it's an important perspective for me to have." Another leader contrasted the SCALE experience with the ways in which the charter and traditional public spheres often interact with one another:

> "I am so adamant that this is a unique setting that ideally we'd love to see replicated elsewhere because more often than not, the charter world and the traditional district world are antagonistic and absolutely do not share—very intentionally do not share information with each other—and that hurts kids."

Facilitators

In addition to the education leaders at the core of the work, the SCALE Initiative has thrived on the strength of the Bain team that plans and facilitates the group's workshops. A core team of Bain representatives has worked with the group from the outset, developing strong relationships with the participants and designing a series of workshops addressing the needs of the group. In addition, Bain has invited experts from within and from outside the organization to lend their expertise around particular topics. The Bain team includes prominent leaders within the organization, including the heads of the company's education practice and of the Los Angeles office. Participants recognized and appreciated the caliber of this team and the level of expertise in system change that they routinely bring to the table.

The power of the Bain team, however, extends beyond their credentials to their skills in planning, facilitating, and interpreting when they are organizing and running the workshops. Participants spoke appreciatively of the team's ability to select and present content that applies directly to the challenges their systems face. Facilitating meetings in a way that allows for active engagement and applied learning also has helped make the workshops powerful for education leaders; multiple respondents indicated that Bain's approach to features of quality instruction was something that the leaders would seek to develop within their own systems. The Bain team also plays an important role in applying knowledge from the public sector to the participants' work in public education. As one participant described, "These are guys that have a wealth of experience, they have a wealth of knowledge and understanding, they share it freely, and they really have made it applicable in our situation."

Some respondents attribute the effectiveness of Bain's role to the ongoing participation of key members of the team. In particular, the relationships that all people in the room have developed across time have helped the Bain team respond to the education leaders' feedback and more carefully tailor what happens in the workshops to those leaders' needs. As one participant explained, "It feels very good that they commit this level of energy and commitment to have these people be with us every time, so there is a familiarity that goes through—almost like a coaching relationship—with the group of us."

Content

The third component of the SCALE Initiative that participants describe as contributing to its effectiveness is the content of the workshops. The Bain team has provided education leaders with access to tools and strategies not typically developed within or adapted for the education sphere. For example, the RAPID tool for organizational decision making and the guidelines for crafting messages around change emerge from a body of research in the private sector, not in education. Moreover, many education system leaders ascend to their professional positions through extensive experience in and growing responsibilities within school systems, not necessarily through formal training in organizational leadership. The opportunity to access the tools and strategies introduced in the Bain workshops is therefore unlike most other professional learning opportunities that participant have.

In addition to the general research, tools, and strategies to support leadership effectiveness, the Bain team has conducted three surveys within the participants' systems. The first, conducted between the February and March meetings in 2013, provided an organizational diagnostic overview of each leader's organization. The second survey, administered before the November 2013 meeting, explored teacher

and principal perceptions of the principal role to provide a lens into the leadership pipelines within school systems. The third survey, conducted prior to the group's November 2014 workshop, asked second- and third-line leaders within the education systems for their impressions about decision-making effectiveness. Each of these surveys has provided system leaders with concrete data about their organizations that connect directly to the content of the workshops. Participants expressed appreciation for the actionable information they have received from the surveys to leverage continued improvement efforts within their own systems.

Interaction Among Participants, Facilitators, and Content

The effectiveness of the SCALE Initiative rests not solely on the presence of a strong peer group of participants, skilled facilitators, and relevant content. It is the interaction among the three that brings each to life and makes it most useful.

Participants' interaction with the content helps make it relevant to their work. Several respondents described unwillingness among many of their peers to apply lessons from other sectors to the context of public schools. As one individual explained, "Sometimes people are still myopic in the world of public education. They don't fathom that there are things they can learn from outside." Members of the SCALE Initiative, in contrast, have helped make the most of potentially valuable information by actively seeking connections where they exist rather than looking for excuses to ignore them. As one system leader explained, "Whether you're in a school district or Fortune 500, there [are] some aspects to change and communication and leadership that are consistent across context. I think sometimes in education we tend to only focus on the contexts that are similar to ours." Another participant shared a similar sentiment: "Change is change….Leading a large organization is leading a large organization. The skills required to change culture are very similar, whether they like it or not."

Likewise, Bain's interaction with the content and with the participants has been critical to crafting effective workshops for the group. This role has required a deep understanding, both of the content and the needs and priorities of the participants, and finding ways to connect the two in powerful ways. Participants also expressed appreciation for Bain's role in translating knowledge across contexts— finding connections where they exist while acknowledging important disconnects. As one participant observed, "Sometimes you have to translate it to be more relevant and certainly, on occasion, we do challenge the Bain folks with some questions and they seek clarification to understand, because sometimes the translations might not make 100 percent sense." Another system leader offered a similar perspective by saying, "I think they have done enough work with school systems to know that not everything is going to apply directly….I feel like they've been very cognizant of the 'translation factors.'"

Norms for Engagement

The first three elements of success—participants, facilitators, and content—work not only because of their interaction with one another but also because their interaction takes place around a set of key norms for engagement.

Commitment

Respondents suggest that the work of the SCALE Initiative is strongest when participants make a strong commitment to the work. This commitment takes place first through attendance, with individuals making the group a priority and building stronger relationships and content understanding through repeated connections with one another. It also takes place through individual behavior in the workshops themselves. Participants actively engage with the Bain facilitators and with one another, generally avoiding the distractions of mobile devices and other concerns, and as a result enhance the learning experience for all involved.

Honesty and Vulnerability

Beyond participants' investment in the initiative, the nature of the group's conversation also influences the quality of the experience. System leaders have displayed a willingness to connect what they learn in the workshops to their own experiences—not just the positive behaviors that reflect key lessons from Bain, but the struggles that can inhibit and undermine best practices. One participant described the set of leaders in the room by referencing the group's openness: "I've found them to be incredibly engaging, incredibly forthright. I've found them to be very open and willing to share success, but also some of the failures and challenges that they're facing." Another education leader also spoke about the group's willingness to be vulnerable, explaining, "We are willing to share quite publicly internal data in this work—good, bad, or ugly—and I'm really proud of us for doing that." Because participants have an opportunity to learn from both successes and failures, and because they are willing to expose their practices to critical and constructive feedback, the honesty that characterizes the group's interactions deepens the quality of conversation and the learning opportunities for those involved.

Confidentiality, Trust, and Safety

The vulnerability that leads to quality conversation does not happen automatically. Rather, participants make it possible through commitments to confidentiality that have produced a sense of trust and safety in the room. For this group in particular—leaders who head large educational systems—this element of the group's interactions is unique and especially important. As one participant explained,

> "There's no place safe that I can actually talk about what's going on because there's always somebody there that either wants my job, is my board member that's going to evaluate me— there's all that stuff, so there's not a safety zone. Well, in that forum there was a safety zone because people could come together and talk about legitimate issues."

Interview responses further suggest that the trust has grown across time as relationships have strengthened among group members.

What Elements of the SCALE Initiative Have Posed the Greatest Challenges?

Although interview responses and workshop dialogue reveal great appreciation for the SCALE Initiative, they also reveal two areas of struggle: consistent attendance and the evolution of group membership.

Attendance

The first challenge regarding attendance is logistical. The nature of the group, a set of leaders of large education organizations with multiple competing demands on their time, means that finding mutually available time for members to meet is nearly impossible. Group attendance rates—an average of 69 percent of participating system leaders attend any portion of a given workshop—reflect this difficulty. The change in format across time, from an approach in 2013 in which two pairs of workshops introduced and then followed up on a specific topic to the 2014 model that featured a single event in spring and another in fall, also grew out of participant availability. Meeting organizers simply could not find the time on individuals' calendars to pair workshops as the initiative moved into its second year.

Attendance challenges extend beyond scheduling, however. Interview responses suggest that the quality of the sessions themselves relies on consistent participation among the system leaders. In particular, the strength of relationships and nature of the interactions among the people in the room are more powerful when the same group contributes in each session. Similarly, attendance issues pose questions about Bain's commitment to the work. Bain representatives have invested substantial resources in ensuring the initiative's success—not only in planning the workshops but also in flying senior representatives with busy schedules to the workshops to participate as contributing members of the learning community. When the SCALE experience adds value to the leaders and the organizations they represent, Bain representatives perceive that commitment as worthwhile. If system leaders do not make the same investment to make the initiative a priority, however, it raises questions about whether the relationship should continue.

Membership

A second challenge relates to group membership. Turnover is a fact of life for leaders in public school systems and has impacted the participants of the SCALE Initiative as well, with half of the leaders transitioning out of their roles during the life of the initiative. The group has therefore confronted questions about how to manage group membership as the individuals in leadership roles change. In most cases, organizers have invited each leader's successor to join the group. Reasons for doing so include a desire to maintain a critical mass of participants, an opportunity to build a support network for new leaders as they transition into their roles, and a sense of commitment to the systems that have benefitted from the initiative's leadership development efforts. This replacement philosophy, however, may introduce tensions for group members who see the group as they originally designed it—not as a collection of systems, but as an opportunity to build relationships and develop the leadership skills of individuals. Participants therefore addressed some of the implications for the interactions among group members.

Interview responses suggest that relationships are strongest among members of the group with the longest involvement. The Toronto trip in spring 2012 and subsequent planning sessions in particular seem to have been instrumental in developing a sense of shared purpose among leaders who might not otherwise interact. The quotes from system leaders in the earlier discussion about participants especially testify to the strength of the relationships among leaders from CMOs and traditional public school districts. Some interview responses, however, indicate that the same connection is not as strong

for newer additions to the group. As one leader reflected, "You know, I didn't see any impact, positive or negative [to bringing charter and district leaders together]. I don't think private entity charters or private schools or anything like that really understand public school." In the absence of the kind of uniting experience that fueled the initiative's early work, there may have been a missed opportunity to build the same sense of common purpose as the group evolves.

Interview responses also suggest that member turnover has impacted the way in which participants interact. Many system leaders suggested that the transition has been seamless and that new additions have adapted quickly to the norms of the group. Other comments indicate that the changes require additional acclimation and relationship building. As one leader reflected, "I just think that changes the dynamic because you have some bonds with folks and that person leaves and somebody comes in their place and you don't know them yet. Even if it's the same district, the reality is it's a different person, a different leader." Another participant suggested that new relationships may not develop as strongly without some careful attention: "We can't just expect the collaboration to take the same form based on the foundation that it was originally built [on]." Another individual connected issues of membership to the commitment of initiative participants, explaining, "We have people coming in and I don't feel they've had the same level of ownership because they weren't there in the creation of the group."

For their part, comments from new members about the benefits they experience from the workshops and the most effective features of the initiative are consistent with those of the original participants—in other words, the opportunity has been powerful even for people without a long-standing history with the group. However, these individuals do not appear to share an understanding of the initiative's history or even the rationale behind their inclusion. Some of these participants were aware of SCALE because of their predecessor's involvement, and existing relationships with others in the group made it easy for them to accept the invitation. Nevertheless, the orientation to the group appears to have been fairly limited. As one individual shared, "I just kind of fed into [my predecessor's] calendar….I just continued where [my predecessor] left off." Another explained, "They just started inviting me and I went."

These reflections on group membership suggest the need for clarity around membership decisions. Explicit agreements among participants about the parameters for membership can help create a shared understanding and address the tensions that emerged in interview responses. Participant comments also introduce the idea that a thoughtful process for introducing new members might help with both continuity and group dynamics. As one person observed, "I do think we could do a better job of integrating folks and giving them more of a sense of how we got [to] where we're at." Providing some sense of the history, motivation, and goals of the initiative can help new members better understand the reasons for their invitation and participation. Establishing clear expectations for behavior and commitment can help ensure that new members demonstrate the same level of engagement as that of their peers who began the work.

What Lessons Can We Learn From the SCALE Initiative?

The SCALE Initiative offers several lessons for system leaders seeking opportunities to build their own leadership capacity. Some of these lessons apply to the SCALE Initiative itself and the ways in which the

group can evolve most effectively as it progresses. Others might apply to the wide range of system leaders in California and beyond who seek similar opportunities to build their knowledge and skills while learning from a powerful peer group.

Lessons for SCALE Participants

Initiative participants expressed a universal desire to continue working together, both in their interviews and in a survey that Bain conducted prior to the group's November 2014 meeting. The group further expressed a desire to continue working with Bain. The combination of content expertise, facilitation skills, history, and relationships with the group have not only supported a high-quality experience to date but also helped the group avoid starting from scratch with a new set of partners. During the November 2014 meeting, Bain facilitators shared their willingness to continue working with the group and are in the process of planning a workshop for early 2015. For the near future, then, it appears that the SCALE Initiative will continue to progress in a similar form as for its work in 2013–14.

Because the group has elected to continue its work together, an opportunity exists to reflect on and address some of the challenges it has encountered. A conversation among participants at the November 2014 workshop began this process. Workshop organizers first expressed a desire to develop a stronger process to integrate new members more effectively into the group. In addition, participants voiced the need for greater clarity around the parameters for membership. Continued participation in the initiative should be an option for all who have been involved already. However, participants suggested that any continuing member needs to commit to making the SCALE Initiative a priority. Although the group has yet to identify the specific conditions of membership, members agreed that individuals will jeopardize and potentially forfeit membership if they fail to attend regularly. In turn, organizers recognized the need to make the conditions for involvement clear when they invite new members to participate. If current members are not willing to make the commitment to continue, current participants may recommend peers from both CMOs and districts who share the disposition for collaboration, reflection, and improvement that has characterized the group to this point.

Lessons for Other Systems

The experiences of SCALE Initiative members suggest that it has provided a powerful learning experience and network of support for the education system leaders involved. These individuals have had a unique opportunity to leverage the expertise of their peers and leaders from the private sector to improve their own capacity to lead large education systems. However, the participants in this group represent only a tiny fraction of the roughly 1,000 local education agencies in the state of California and serve only a minority of the state's 6.2 million students. Are there lessons that other leaders in the state can learn to improve their own efforts?

The SCALE experience suggests that other leaders interested in developing their own capacity in this way might be wise to address the components that have contributed to participants' positive feelings about the initiative: participants, facilitators, content, and norms for engagement. First and foremost, leaders from any systems have an opportunity to develop a network of peers focused on key improvement issues. Shared priorities, similarities in context, and commitments to reflection and

continuous improvement have created ties for SCALE members and can establish the foundation for strong connections among other individuals as well.

Lessons from the SCALE Initiative also indicate that careful attention to facilitators and content are important. In the case of SCALE, representatives from Bain have played a valuable role in planning and facilitating meetings while selecting and developing content best suited to the group's needs. However, members saw value in their opportunity to work together even before Bain entered the picture, and members expressed a strong desire to continue even if Bain could not make the same commitment. School leaders have tremendous responsibilities and demands on their time already, and any effort that depends on them planning workshops or other collaborative activities without assistance risks falling prey to other competing priorities. Therefore, finding a partner who can plan and facilitate the work may be critical to the success of a learning community like this. Likewise, identifying and adapting content that adds value to participants and builds their leadership skills may determine the value—and ultimately the success—of any group's work together.

In addition to participants, facilitators, and content, shared norms for engagement may influence the quality of any learning network heavily. One lesson learned from the SCALE Initiative is that clarity around the parameters of membership and the conditions for participation may be important to establish from the outset. Beyond these conditions, a willingness to share successes and challenges transparently can deepen the quality of participant interaction. Commitments to confidentiality and trust contribute to a safe space where participants can develop a strong network of support and share their work in a way that deepens the learning opportunities for all involved.

Finally, the SCALE experience suggests that participants should walk into a new network with expectations for growth across time. In the SCALE Initiative, relationships among continuing members have strengthened as the group continues to meet, leading to greater levels of trust and higher quality experiences. The workshops themselves also have become increasingly relevant as Bain representatives and system leaders together have honed in on the content and meeting formats that provide the most value. This process of evolution is natural, and participants should understand the growth process that may characterize new networks.

At the same time, participants should provide and expect from their colleagues a commitment to the work that ensures its value. Although SCALE participants described a number of features of the initiative that contributed to their positive experiences, the bottom line is that they felt they were becoming better leaders as a result. One leader was blunt: "If it still adds value, I will keep attending." Another echoed the sentiment by saying, "It's very simple: If I don't get value out of wherever I go—and the value has to be for my system—then I won't go." Education system leaders constantly battle competing demands on their time. To make the work worthwhile, it needs make them better leaders. Through careful attention to decisions about participants, facilitators, content, and norms for engagement, leaders may maximize the prospects for success in any new learning network they create.

Conclusion

The SCALE Initiative is an opportunity for CEOs and superintendents in several of California's education systems to develop the leadership capacity to lead large organizations to student success. To accomplish this goal, it brings together a unique combination of partners—leaders from CMOs and traditional districts, plus representatives from Bain who bring expertise from the private sector—in a learning community whose members have described the experience as one of the most valuable experiences of their careers in public education. The initiative's story suggests that leaders can leverage the same principles of collaboration to drive improvement efforts in other parts of the K–12 system and improve their effectiveness as system leaders. The initiative's story also points to some key conditions for success that can strengthen the SCALE Initiative as it moves forward while informing potential learning networks among other groups of leaders. As one leader reflected, "It is our job to fill others' buckets, but it is hard to fill up others' buckets when your own pail is empty." Efforts such as the SCALE Initiative may provide an opportunity to fill CEO and superintendent "buckets" and help drive the work of public education forward.

Appendix A

Interview Respondent	Professional Role as of Spring 2014
Chris Bierly	Partner, Bain & Company
Richard Carranza	Superintendent, San Francisco Unified School District
John Deasy	Superintendent, Los Angeles Unified School District
Mike Hanson	Superintendent, Fresno Unified School District
Ivan Hindshaw	Partner, Bain & Company
Parker Hudnut	Chief Executive Officer, Inner City Education Foundation Public Schools
Marc Johnson	Former Superintendent, Sanger Unified School District
Bob Lenz	Cofounder and Chief of Innovation, Envision Schools
Gabriela Mafi	Superintendent, Garden Grove Unified School District
Rick Miller	Executive Director, California Office to Reform Education
Rick Miller	Superintendent, Santa Ana Unified School District
Matt Navo	Superintendent, Sanger Unified School District
Sara Noguchi	Interim Superintendent, Sacramento City Unified School District
Marco Petruzzi	Chief Executive Officer, Green Dot Public Schools
Jonathan Raymond	Former Superintendent, Sacramento City Unified School District
Laura Schwalm	Senior Partner, California Education Partners
Abby Smith	Principal, Bain & Company
Chris Steinhauser	Superintendent, Long Beach Unified School District
Gia Truong	Chief Executive Officer, Envision Schools
James Willcox	Chief Executive Officer, Aspire Public Schools