

## A broad base of support is required in the district and community

Building the constituency that supports performance-based compensation is a community organizing function. It requires extensive and ongoing two-way engagement yet is characteristically treated as a one-way communications event by most districts. As a consequence, participants in the reform at the school level often feel shut out of opportunities to shape and improve implementation. Even worse, the broader community, whose informed support will be essential for generating the resources necessary for sustainability, is frequently shut out altogether—until more money is needed, which is too late in the process.

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### Purposes

Districts need to recognize from the start the essential role of constituency-building in advancing performance-based compensation. Failure to do so has undercut the potential of many compensation reform efforts nationwide.

Constituency-building is not a complementary function. It is absolutely pivotal to developing and carrying out a high-quality pilot and plan. It provides an extensive cross section of constituents with the opportunity to influence the reform and plan, share critical information before and during implementation, and build support for the new direction in compensation.

The constituency-building strategy has five main purposes:

- To build broad-based understanding within the district and community of the intent, impact, and implications of the compensation reform.
- To ensure that teachers—the professionals most affected by the plan—have extensive opportunities to identify needs, inform organizational responses to the needs, and shape the substance of the developing pilot and longer-term plan.
- To increase the levels of trust and buy-in among district leaders, site-level educators, and the community.
- To acquire information needed for successful policymaking.
- To establish and broaden the base of public support needed to secure leadership and financial commitments from the community.

## Core requirements

The core requirements of a constituency-building strategy include identifying targeted constituencies within the district and the broader community, their information requirements, their salient concerns and goals for compensation reform, the most cost-effective vehicles and media for reaching them, and the information and training requirements for the spokespeople for the compensation reform initiative. Based on these requirements, a district and union need to prepare a communications plan to be approved and authorized by their leadership. The plan should delineate necessary staffing and budgetary resources for communicating and engaging participation at the school, district, and community levels.

The design of the new compensation plan affects the community organizing challenge. If all teachers can participate and are eligible for performance-based awards, then it is far easier to develop school-level support for the reform than if the effort is based on a single state test that may apply to as few as 20 to 35 percent of the teachers. CTAC's survey data from diverse urban districts suggest that teachers and parents are more likely to be supportive of the initiative if awards are based on multiple measures of student achievement.<sup>11</sup>

Policymakers and educational leaders have launched compensation reforms whose potential success has been compromised and undermined by a lack of understanding of both past efforts and basic requirements. In particular, the track record of compensation reform efforts demonstrates the importance of educating diverse constituencies and being educated by them. This is especially important around controversial issues, as it was in the era of desegregation. Remember, the forces of misinformation are always more powerful than the forces of accurate information in compensation reform.

When districts have launched compensation reform efforts without a broad base of understanding of the organizational and financial demands, it has proven unusually difficult to recover from those initial and recurring missteps.

An initiative must assist key constituencies—state and district policymakers, district administrators, teacher union leaders and teachers, business leaders and private philanthropies, parents, and leaders of community organizations—to understand the scope of efforts and steps to be taken to develop and sustain compensation reform that benefits students and teachers. Depending on the state school finance formula, efforts may well extend to the governor and state legislature.

A constituency-building strategy is at root based on the premise that all stakeholders have legitimate roles and appropriate concerns. A district ought to act and be perceived as a fair and honest broker. This means taking the long view, knowing that what a stakeholder believes at the beginning of the process may change over time. Additionally, in order to

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produce consensus, important concerns of groups that will become involved later in the process—such as the broader electorate or those responsible for implementation—need to be anticipated and represented in the early stages.

Denver’s accomplishments in this regard are particularly noteworthy given the previous history of contentious union-management relations including a teachers’ strike, the prior need for the governor to impose a system-wide Collaborative Decision-Making reform on the district, and the precedent of unsuccessful efforts to garner community financial backing to support reform efforts. Denver’s compensation and system improvements advanced during a period in which there were five superintendents or interim superintendents, changes in school board leadership and composition, and changes in teachers’ union leadership. What’s more, a fiscal crisis and pay freeze after union approval of the new compensation plan threatened to undo the agreement. Yet the constituency that was supportive of compensation reform enabled efforts to continue moving forward.

As with any community organizing effort, constituency-building depends on a great deal of gritty and granular legwork. It takes a significant commitment of time and focus to assist stakeholders in understanding the core elements of compensation reform, the potential content of different plans, the process of development, and the core requisites, relationships, and funding necessary for success. But building these understandings provides the base for institutional and community change processes, and the capacities necessary to develop a compensation initiative that triggers, and is aligned more broadly with, a school system driven by student learning and evidence of results.

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### Broadening awareness through the media

The media can make or break a reform. So the media has to be included in a constituency-building strategy. It is critical that media representatives and leaders understand the initiative and the role they play in educating the public and garnering the necessary support for success. In the absence of this type of base building, a headline announcing, “District Will Use Merit Pay,” can result in an immediate union reaction that handcuffs both district and union leaders. An editorial attacking district or union leaders more often engenders entrenchment than institutional change.

A district builds understanding of both the issues and the impact of reporting on the compensation reform process by working with lead writers and editorial page editors from major dailies, news services, and the electronic media. The media can be educated about and prepared for a different type of reporting—one that moves away from featuring individual students, parents, or teachers and toward investigative pieces about the educational system and the requirements of compensation reform.

The media, similar to policymakers, needs to know both the particulars of this reform as well as the role they play in making the reform effective. They educate the public about value-added methodologies, appropriate applications of assessment data, the costs associated with improving the plans, and the overall potential of the reform. The media has played a key role in helping the public understand the implications of education reform in cities such as Denver and Dallas. By contrast, flawed communication between the district and the media in Houston has been detrimental to that city's efforts.

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## Bottom line

Both practice and policy must delineate the constituency-building requirements and timeline for strategies related to the design, development, and implementation of a performance-based compensation pilot and plan. This means identifying the elements of a community organizing strategy as part of the broader process of increasing public awareness and gaining the support of diverse publics for the initiative.

Two-way communication between the district and all key internal and external constituencies within the educational and political communities requires rigorous attention. Taking such an approach enables pivotal constituent groups to shape the compensation system, integrates constituent responses into the continued development of the compensation system, and provides the mechanisms that ensure continued constituent ownership in the post-pilot period.