



Evaluation of the California Subject Matter Project

Cross Case Summary

Nancy Kamprath Bier and Alix Gallagher
SRI International
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Evaluation of the California Subject Matter Project: Cross-Case Summary

Introduction

SRI International has collaborated with the California Subject Matter Project (CSMP) for the past 10 years to provide the Project with both an external evaluation of its professional development work as well as technical assistance in its efforts towards continuous improvement. As part of this work, the CSMP asked SRI to conduct case studies to describe the work of each of the projects, some of the challenges they have addressed, and reported outcomes for the districts, schools, teachers, and students they have worked with. SRI staff collaborated with CSMP leadership to identify sites within their projects that had programs or partnerships that could be used to illustrate the work of the CSMP. The resulting 10 case studies, conducted over a 4-year period from 2009 to 2012, described some of the ways that the CSMP has helped meet the professional development needs of the teachers who are responsible for improving the achievement of students in their classrooms.¹

Focused primarily on describing partnerships or, in some cases, key programs the projects had developed, the topics included the following:

- A partnership between the UC Berkeley History-Social Science Project and the Mt. Diablo Unified School District to change the ways that history is taught.
- A partnership between the California World Language Project² at Stanford University and the Palo Alto Unified School District to create a strong high school Mandarin language program.
- The Sonoma State Mathematics Project's partnership with a local school district around lesson study.
- A partnership between the California Reading and Literature Project and the National School District to train and assist teachers and schools throughout the district in improving student performance in reading.
- A partnership between the Science and Health Education Partnership (SEP) at UCSF and San Francisco Unified School District to set up a series of interconnected supports for San Francisco teachers.
- The Bay Area Writing Project's partnership with Oakland Unified School District around a performance assessment system for writing.

¹ Four case studies were conducted in 2008–09, three in 2010–11, and three in 2011–12. For one project, the California Mathematics Project, SRI conducted two case studies.

² Formerly known as the California Foreign Language Project.

- A partnership between Temecula Valley Unified School District and the Riverside, Inyo, Mono, and San Bernardino California Arts Project (RIMS CAP), to build a K–12, standards-aligned arts program by developing teacher capacity for standards-based arts education and implementing a strategic arts education plan.
- A partnership between the mathematics department at California State University, Bakersfield, and a local high school to develop the expertise of teachers in their mathematics department.
- The Equity and Access program of the California International Studies Program, which partners with schools to support teachers across disciplines in implementing strategies for increasing student engagement and learning.
- The work of the California Physical Education and Health Project to institute change among teachers and schools to fulfill the vision for standards-based physical education.

A number of interesting themes emerged from the case studies as we looked across the professional development efforts carried out through the partnerships and programs of the CSMP. We begin here with an overview of the CSMP to provide context for this report. Next, we describe the themes that emerged around the work of the projects, elements contributing to their success, and challenges they have sought to overcome. We hope that this summary provides a lens through which project staff can view their own work and serves as a vehicle to communicate the work of the CSMP projects to outside audiences.

CSMP Overview

The CSMP is a network of nine discipline-based statewide projects.³ Each of these projects supports a number of regional sites housed on university campuses throughout California. The mission of the CSMP is to improve student achievement and learning by providing comprehensive, content-focused professional development for teachers, developing teacher leadership, and creating and maintaining discipline-specific networks of teachers and university faculty. The CSMP provides classroom teachers with a variety of professional learning opportunities such as workshops, leadership institutes, and inservice opportunities designed by teacher leaders and faculty content specialists to improve instruction for all learners. These events are designed to support participants in learning to engage in research and use research-based strategies to improve their practice in the teaching of their discipline. The CSMP programs also are designed to infuse literacy strategies for improving the academic skills of English learners and provide instructional techniques to meet the needs of students with low academic skills. With a

³ California World Language Project (formerly the California Foreign Language Project), California History-Social Science Project, California International Studies Project, California Mathematics Project, California Physical Education-Health Project, California Reading and Literature Project, California Science Project, California Writing Project, and The California Arts Project.

consistent focus on high-quality support for teachers, the CSMP has evolved over time to meet the changing needs of teachers and the goals of state policymakers.

Key Themes

One of the foundations of the CSMP is that each of the projects is associated with a specific discipline. As such, projects often have different perspectives on their work and, in some cases, different ways of carrying out the work. Despite these differences, the case studies provide a lens through which we can see common themes, successes, and challenges across the work of the projects. We discuss here the themes we saw around the projects' professional development model, elements that contributed to their success, and challenges they had faced.

The projects' professional development model

Despite being based in different disciplines, each of the projects structure their work around the same basic model and have commonalities in the way the work is carried out. As we discuss here, some of the key commonalities among the projects include a consistent emphasis on core elements, training teacher leaders, developing professional communities, and maintaining a student-driven focus.

The core elements of CSMP have remained consistent even as the projects have adapted to address challenges and meet the needs of the districts, schools, and teachers they serve.

The core elements which guide the work of the CSMP projects are a commitment to deepening teacher content knowledge, improving teacher knowledge of pedagogy in the content area, and developing a network of teacher leaders across the state. In addition, across the projects, CSMP professional development events are characterized by collective work, content focus, active learning, differentiation, and ongoing activities that are sustained over time.

Training teacher leaders to play a key role at professional development events is an intentional strategy to support teachers, expand the reach of the CSMP, and encourage fundamental change in the classroom.

All of the projects have specific procedures for recruiting teacher leaders as well as events to train teachers to take on leadership roles. Teacher leaders receive opportunities to develop and lead professional development, to demonstrate lessons, and to conduct observations. Teacher leaders may provide instruction and mentorship not only at CSMP events, but also back at their schools and districts. Having teachers assume leadership roles helps to extend the reach of the CSMP— making it more likely that fundamental change will take root in the schools and districts where these teacher leaders work.

Development of professional communities across the state is an important strategy for helping teachers interact with each other in a multitude of ways.

Providing teachers with new content knowledge and pedagogical strategies is important to the work, but is not sufficient in and of itself to meaningfully change instructional

practices in the classroom. Creating professional networks across the state gives teachers opportunities to interact with other teachers in a multitude of ways. A professional community provides opportunities for teachers to challenge each other's thinking, to invigorate teaching practices, and to discuss new ideas. Teaching can be an isolating experience, particularly in disciplines and grade levels in which there may be only a small number of teachers in a school or district (e.g., art, physical education). The opportunity to mentor and be mentored, to observe and be observed, to have meaningful interactions with other like-minded professionals are important to enable teachers to improve their practice and advance their ability to help their students succeed.

The CSMP projects focus on shifting teaching practices from being primarily teacher-driven to being more student-driven.

One of the themes present in many of the cases is a focus on shifting the work of schools and teacher from being primarily teacher-driven to being student-driven. Reflecting wider changes in instructional priorities across the state, the CSMP partnerships emphasize helping teachers learn processes for identifying students' needs and understanding how to use that information to create effective experiences and structures in their classrooms.

Elements contributing to the success of the projects

Both as individual projects' and as a professional development organization as a whole, the CSMP have gained a reputation for consistent, high-quality work. A number of factors have contributed to this success including having existing capacity, supporting standards-based education, building relationships, investing in intensive and in-depth teacher contact, and fostering commitment from districts, schools, and teachers.

In varying forms, one of the keys to success was that projects had existing capacity that enabled them to respond to emerging needs—at the local, state, or national levels.

The projects have built capacity—in personnel and in a knowledge base—that enables them to not only identify emerging needs, but also quickly develop the necessary approaches, either through adapting existing work or developing new concepts, that will best address these needs for districts, schools, and teachers. This capacity to respond to emerging needs—be they at the local level, the state level, or the national level—is one of the unique strengths of the CSMP.

The CSMP projects have played a key role not only in supporting teachers' efforts to engage in standards-based education, but also in shaping the new standards that have been developed in recent years.

As the financial resources for teacher education have dwindled, teachers' ability to access high-quality professional development in all disciplines has become quite limited. And with the recent increased emphasis on standards-based instruction, and particularly the implementation of the new Common Core Standards, teachers' needs for support are greater than ever as they seek to adapt to the new standards and curriculum. The fact that the CSMP projects are known to deliver high-quality, standards-based professional

development means that they are sought out by districts and schools. Across the projects, and particularly in projects that have traditionally not been linked to standards-based curriculum (e.g., physical education and the arts), the CSMP projects have provided the ongoing support and guidance for teachers to engage with standards-based curriculum. In fact, having the infrastructure already in place to support teachers has made it possible for many projects to play a key role in guiding these standards, as well as enabling them to quickly provide supports for teachers to adapt to the new standards.

In every case, building relationships with teachers, schools, and districts was central to the success of the work

Throughout the cases, a key theme is the importance of ongoing relationships in the work of the projects. In some cases there are longstanding relationships between teachers and the projects, some formal and some informal. Through these personal and professional networks of educators, the projects identify needs, propose work, and maintain partnerships. One of the core elements that helped the projects succeed is developing teacher leaders, using teachers who have been through the training and have developed expertise to take on leadership roles and teaching responsibilities. Indeed, many of the leaders within the CSMP projects are former teachers or teachers on special assignment, closely linking the projects to schools and districts throughout California.

Their investment in intensive and in-depth contact with teachers over time has resulted in changes in teacher practice in a deep and sustained way.

The majority of the work described in the case studies involves fairly intensive and in-depth contact with teachers over time. Conducting events over multiple days, with follow-up throughout the year, has meant that teachers can more deeply engage with the instructors and the content of the events. The partnerships they have built with schools have translated into being able to provide multiple opportunities for teachers to engage with the projects over a number of years. Instead of receiving 1-day workshops and returning to their classrooms, CSMP participants are part of a larger network of committed professionals that are involved in ongoing efforts to improve their work. Providing in-depth professional development over time is a unique strength of the CSMP and one that has resulted in changes in the ways teachers think about themselves as professionals.

Fostering commitment from districts, schools, and teachers is an important part of the projects' success.

In all of the cases, having sufficient buy-in from teachers, schools, and districts was critically important to the projects' success. In some cases, the impetus for these partnerships came from the district or school wanting to support their teachers. In other cases, the CSMP reached out to the district or school. But without sufficient support and commitment to the work, professional development is often the first thing put aside due to budget pressures or competing demands for teachers' time. Building commitment to and belief in the work is one of the ways that the CSMP projects have not only kept

existing partnerships going, but have been able to build new partnerships even in an environment of declining funding and other resources.

Challenges to which the projects have responded

The ability to respond to challenges and adapt to changing situations is one of the strengths of the CSMP projects. Particularly as we discuss here, in dealing with the sometimes interconnected issues of financial resources and pressures of accountability.

Financial resources played a significant role in the development of programs and in projects' abilities and struggles to maintain the resources required to sustain their work.

The CSMP has been challenged to maintain high-quality professional development while responding to changes in funding sources and significant declines in overall funding availability. While external funding from federal as well as state programs has helped, many CSMP projects have turned increasingly to cost recovery models to support the districts and teachers they serve. In many cases, districts and schools are more interested in hiring the CSMP for short-term assistance in implementing curriculum. Although a fee-for-service model may make the CSMP more responsive to its partners, it also raises challenges of maintaining high-quality and relatively long duration programs that meet all educators' needs. This has had a negative impact both on the work being done with teachers, as well as the potential impact on the projects' ability to maintain the infrastructure to respond to future needs of districts and schools across California.

Accountability policies have provided both challenges and opportunities for the projects.

The increased focus on accountability throughout the educational world has led to differing pressures on the various projects. Some projects, such as the California Mathematics Project and the California Reading and Literature Project, have found the pressure to improve student performance in math and reading to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, accountability pressure has led to increased focus on those areas and expanded resources available to support teachers. On the other hand, the accountability pressures sometimes constrain the nature of work that districts and schools want to focus on in those disciplines. For other projects, such as the California Arts Project and the California Health and Physical Education Project, accountability policies left them fighting against marginalization as their subject areas are not tested or used in state accountability calculations.

Concluding Thoughts

For the past 4 years, SRI has collaborated with the CSMP on a series of case studies. Each of these cases provides a picture of the work of the CSMP. As we consider the case study projects together, we see they have kept their core elements intact while evolving in response to new demands. Educators report that the CSMP's investment in intensive and in-depth contact with teachers over time has resulted in changes in teacher practice in a deep and sustained way. The approach the CSMP has taken is to invest time and

resources into creating teachers and teacher leaders who are thinking professionals, able to support each other and colleagues in ongoing improvements in practice.

The CSMP puts California in a unique position among the states of having a professional development infrastructure that can respond quickly and flexibly as needs change. This could prove critical given the adoption of the Common Core State Standards and the need to rapidly help teachers build on their existing content knowledge and pedagogical repertoires to support students in meeting more rigorous academic standards. It is encouraging to see in the cases that the projects have consistently made progress in meeting challenges and indeed in using those challenges to grow and expand the work, as evidenced by the teachers they are reaching, the partnerships formed and maintained over many years, the high quality of their work, and the responsiveness of their work to the changing contexts in California. As California works to support educators in implementing the Common Core State Standards, the CSMP could provide a critical resource for the state's efforts. The infrastructure of expert teacher leaders and professional development providers who are well-versed in meeting local needs and working to facilitate teachers in engaging students in rigorous academic work across all of the academic disciplines should provide the state with a strong foundation for its efforts.