ROAD SIGNS
FROM A NEW PATH FORWARD

Lessons from leaders shaping education systems with the people they serve

State-and-Local Coalitions

Inclusion & Empathy

Co-Creation

Reciprocity

JENNIFER POON AND PAUL LEATHER
CENTER FOR INNOVATION IN EDUCATION
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"We are greater than, and greater for, the sum of us."
— Heather McGhee, author and policy advocate

A parent speaks before her school district's strategic planning committee, her voice stern with years of frustration over how she believes the district has mistreated her child with special needs. The committee members hear what she says, but her laser-like focus consumes the conversation, stalling the agenda and elevating discomfort.

In some districts, committee leadership might quell her with a hand-wave – "We will note your concern" – and then quickly move the process along.

Except that, in this district, empathizing with this parent and her child's experience is the process. And this parent belongs to the committee just like everyone else in the room.

In this district, through careful cultivation of mutual respect and hard-earned trust, the parent is invited deeper into the planning process. She helps the committee — a coalition of diverse stakeholders — to understand her needs, and she seeks to understand others' needs, too. She's asked to write core parts of the strategic plan using language that's meaningful to her, and to refine that language with the rest of the coalition. Together, they build a new vision and a strategic plan that represents their collective desires. She goes on to champion the plan and, after it's adopted by the school board, joins the steering committee created to oversee its implementation.

Fantastical as it might sound, this plot is **unfolding right now** in Vermont under the leadership of Burlington School District Superintendent Tom Flanagan.

A similar storyline has taken hold in Kentucky, where Education Commissioner Jason Glass led an intricate process of co-creating a new vision for education built from the hopes, dreams and pain points of diverse stakeholders throughout the state. That vision now fuels the redesign of the state's assessment and accountability systems which, like the visioning process before it, is not pushed top-down by Glass's office but is being constructed from insights emerging directly **from the people on the ground**.

In November 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Gene Wilhoit, Jenny Poon, and the Center for Innovation in Education (C!E) **issued a call** for a new approach to leadership capable of stewarding our education systems through complex times and a **world in flux**, one in which "right answers" cannot be known and where decision-makers must be in direct contact — and work side-by-side — with diverse stakeholders to respond to the evolving needs of students and families.

In that 2020 paper, we suggested that this more collaborative approach to leadership must include changing current systems of educational assessment and accountability, which are entangled in rigid and ineffective hierarchies of decision-making power. And we posited that state and local leaders each have unique roles to play, but that at the end of the day, they must build the new systems together. We called this systems-building approach a *New Path Forward* and invited leaders across the country to explore it.

Today, leaders like Glass and Flanagan have embraced the call, and their respective systems are actively forging new paths. We've spent the last two and a half years supporting and learning alongside them. Now, like cartographers mapping new terrain, we share a few insights we've gathered as road signs for those who might follow.

These insights are:

1. **Coalitions of state and local actors set the stage for systems change.**
2. **Coalitions gain legitimacy through inclusion and empathy.**
3. **Some tasks must be co-created from beginning to end(ish).**
4. **The ultimate outcome is a different, more reciprocal accountability.**
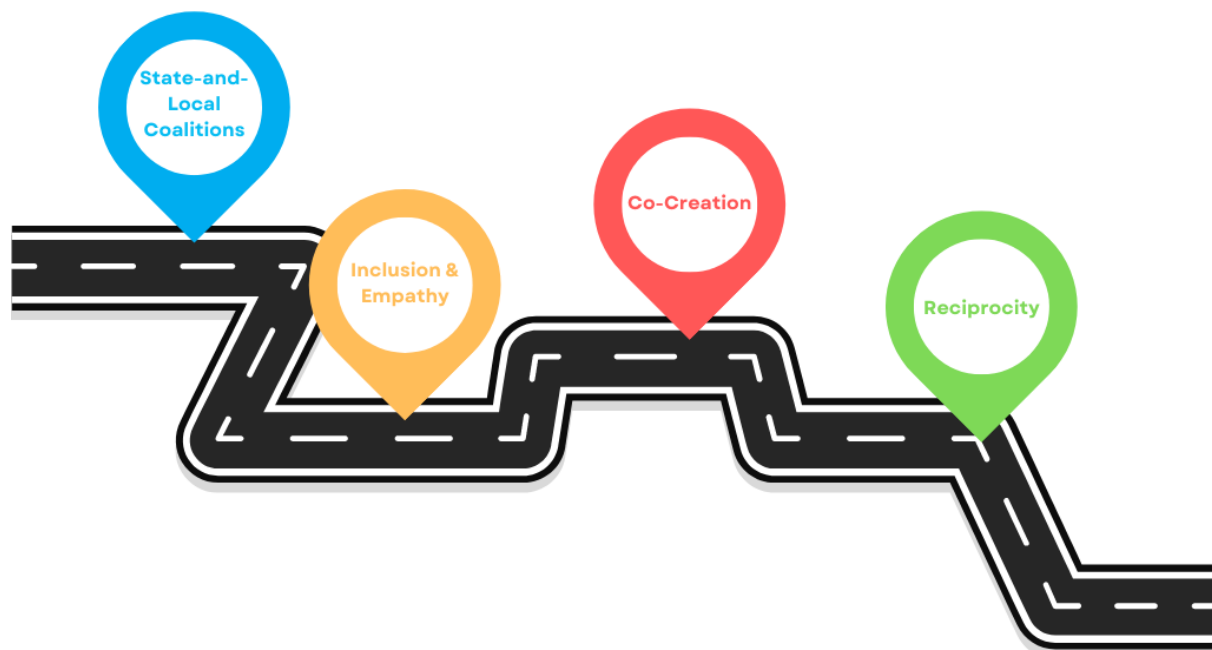
1. Coalitions of state and local actors set the stage for systems change.

In our 2020 paper, we wrote about "state-to-local coalitions" that bring state-level decision-makers into more direct, frequent conversations with local leaders and those closest to the learning process, including educators, students, families and community members. Education leaders typically invite input from these constituents through events like town hall meetings, surveys, focus groups and public comments at school board meetings. However, these means tend to be so tightly controlled by central bureaucracies that

constituents are more likely to feel tokenized or subjugated than empowered.

Instead, in the 2020 paper we envisioned broad-based coalitions where state and local actors stand on even ground as equal participants in a process of understanding each other's needs and collaborating to build new systems together.

Kentucky now provides a living example. First, Glass launched the Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education (KCAE), which brought diverse local stakeholders together with senior members of the Kentucky Department of Education to co-create a vision for the future of education. Then the state launched the **Kentucky United We Learn (KUWL) Council**, which is comprised of local, state and national partners, and is tasked with learning from district-based "Local Laboratories of Learning" (L3s) in order to advise the state education department on policy and structural changes needed to support local advancements in competency-based education (Fig. 1).
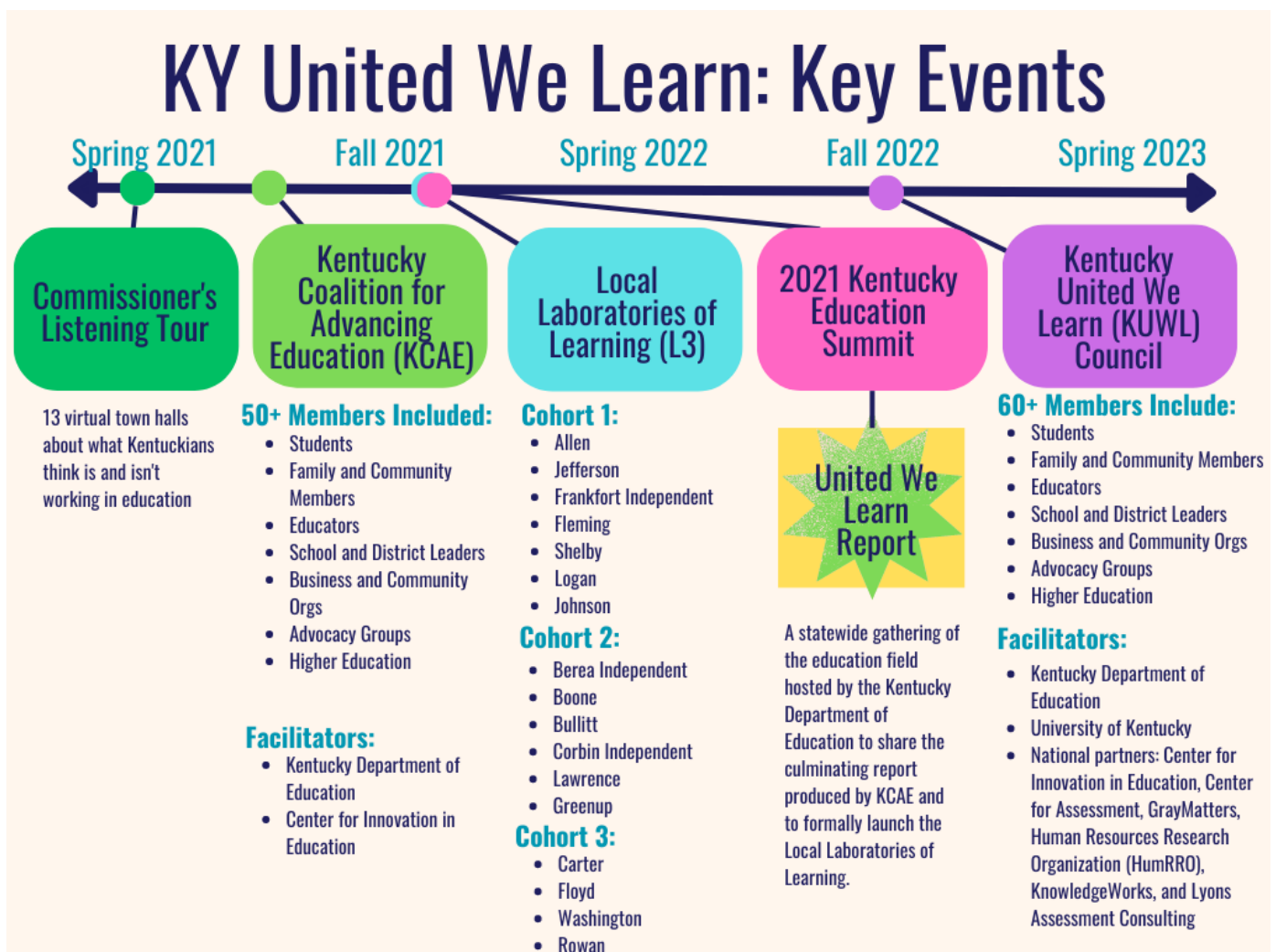
KY United We Learn: Key Events

Spring 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022	Spring 2023
Commissioner's Listening Tour	**Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education (KCAE)**	**Local Laboratories of Learning (L3)**	**2021 Kentucky Education Summit**	**Kentucky United We Learn (KUWL) Council**

Commissioner's Listening Tour

13 virtual town halls about what Kentuckians think is and isn't working in education

Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education (KCAE)

50+ Members Included:
- Students
- Family and Community Members
- Educators
- School and District Leaders
- Business and Community Orgs
- Advocacy Groups
- Higher Education

Facilitators:
- Kentucky Department of Education
- Center for Innovation in Education

Local Laboratories of Learning (L3)

Cohort 1:
- Allen
- Jefferson
- Frankfort Independent
- Fleming
- Shelby
- Logan
- Johnson

Cohort 2:
- Berea Independent
- Boone
- Bullitt
- Corbin Independent
- Lawrence
- Greenup

Cohort 3:
- Carter
- Floyd
- Washington
- Rowan

2021 Kentucky Education Summit

United We Learn Report

A statewide gathering of the education field hosted by the Kentucky Department of Education to share the culminating report produced by KCAE and to formally launch the Local Laboratories of Learning.

Kentucky United We Learn (KUWL) Council

60+ Members Include:
- Students
- Family and Community Members
- Educators
- School and District Leaders
- Business and Community Orgs
- Advocacy Groups
- Higher Education

Facilitators:
- Kentucky Department of Education
- University of Kentucky
- National partners: Center for Innovation in Education, Center for Assessment, GrayMatters, Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), KnowledgeWorks, and Lyons Assessment Consulting

Figure 1. Timeline of major events leading up to the launch of the Kentucky United We Learn Council and the Local Laboratories of Learning.

On a local scale, too, the work in Burlington exemplifies a district-to-community coalition that gathered residents and education stakeholders — including educators, administrators, parents and students — together with members of the district's senior cabinet to create a mutually satisfying five-year strategic plan.

In both examples, there was no pre-existing infrastructure that could have accommodated the intensity and depth of interaction with diverse residents before the coalitions were launched. The coalitions in both examples created fresh space for a regular give-and-take dialogue between central offices and local stakeholders.

In Kentucky especially, holding this kind of space is needed in order to realign state and local systems of school accountability. Currently, districts in America **serve two masters**: the state, which imposes federally-backed expectations for district performance according to metrics like standardized test scores; and the community, which may hold other expectations and metrics for schools based on student outcomes most valued locally, such as leadership, effective communication, and broader definitions of well-being. Thus, districts sit at the crossing point between two axes of accountability: state-to-district (vertical) and district-to-community (horizontal) (Fig. 2). Misalignment between the axes creates conflicting priorities for the district — a phenomenon all too common in our country.
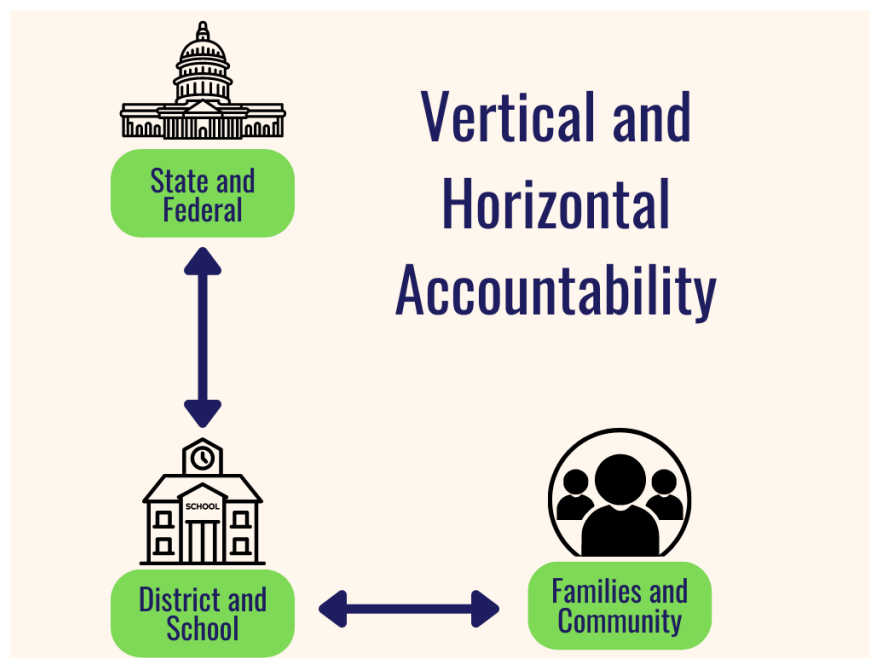

Figure 2. Two axes of accountability: state-to-district (vertical) and district-to-community (horizontal).

Kentucky's coalitions — the KCAE, the KUWL Council and L3s — are actively resolving tensions between vertical and horizontal accountability systems by hosting a space where stakeholders from both axes can identify where one set of expectations conflicts with another. The goal is to co-create a balanced system that can satisfy needs in both directions.

2. Coalitions gain legitimacy through inclusion and empathy.

A coalition can only produce transformative work if stakeholders believe in its legitimacy. In both Kentucky and Burlington, their coalitions gained legitimacy by practicing new habits of working together with deep roots in the grassroots **organizing cycle**, **design thinking** and **liberatory design**, among other disciplines.

For example, the coalitions in both places intentionally sought to include the voices of those typically without seats at decision-making tables, such as family and community members, under-represented demographic groups and students. Kentucky's coalitions uniquely brought together state and local stakeholders as well.

Being intentional about inclusion meant rethinking the process of invitation: not just tapping the "blue ribbon panel" of power players and loudest voices, but also inviting and at times cold-calling individuals from underrepresented demographics and geographies who otherwise may have never heard about the coalition (see Box 1).

Beyond initial invitations, both Kentucky and Burlington's coalitions sought to practice inclusion as an **ongoing habit** by reinforcing the value of each person's perspective and contributions, flattening power dynamics in the room, and continually noticing and correcting whenever voices remained unheard. This was not easy and sometimes required checking in with individuals outside of group meetings, or bringing the group to consciously notice when unconscious biases based on age, class, race or role were showing up. But by insisting that everyone belongs and has a say, both coalitions sought to create spaces where all ideas and perspectives were taken seriously, not just those from people with positional authority.

We noticed that solidarity within both place's coalitions increased through the structured practice of empathy. Members were trained to conduct "empathy interviews" with each other and with external stakeholders. These interviews asked not for opinions or judgments, but for colorful, emotion-rich stories about how the interviewee experienced the education system. This human-centered protocol helped participants to find common ground and understand one another across lines of difference. It also enabled them to identify common themes, as well as "outlier" experiences, that must be addressed if their solutions are to work for everyone.

Importantly, by emphasizing inclusion and empathy, Kentucky and Burlington created coalitions that not only felt better, but also became more potent agents of change. While the two place's initiatives are relatively nascent, we observed that the sense of mutuality each coalition achieved has deepened members' belief in the work and commitment to seeing it through.

For example, in Burlington, coalition members — and one student in particular — stood by the five-year strategic plan they helped shape as they presented it to the district's board of school commissioners for ratification (which it received, unanimously). Since then, some coalition members have gone on to join the district's Strategic Plan Steering Committee to oversee implementation of the plan, or have encouraged

Box 1. Radical inclusion in the Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education

To create a vision reflecting what Kentuckians want from their education system, the Kentucky coalition had to represent the full diversity of geographies, demographics and perspectives across the state. That meant addressing two fundamental challenges: first, making sure that diverse voices were invited and able to participate; and second, facilitating meetings in a way that included all participants and valued their perspectives equally.

Commissioner Glass recognized that when state agencies form working groups, they typically tap educators, experts and advocates already well-connected to the senior leadership team. But Glass aimed to reach beyond "usual suspects" to invite the full range of Kentucky stakeholders, especially those whose input is often devalued or left out of state decision-making processes.

In response, C!E helped the department recruit coalition members through a three-pronged approach:
- 20 members were key stakeholders directly nominated by the state education department;
- 23 members were selected through an open application process using a selection criteria that favored diversity; and
- 9 members (though we targeted more) were recruited through cold calls much like a jury selection — a series of lottery draws that targeted invitations to students, families and staff, and were pulled from across all 8 regions plus Jefferson County.

Throughout the recruitment process we aimed to represent the diversity of Kentucky, believing that the work is stronger when more perspectives shape it.

We also knew that expanding beyond the traditional reach of recruitment meant that members would vary in their social capital and connectedness to the education department. Therefore, it was essential that the way in which participants were recruited never factored into group dynamics. Countering feelings of superiority as well as "imposter syndrome," we wanted to build a culture in which every participant's contribution was viewed as critical to the group's success.

Adapting the Stanford d.school's inclusive design process, from the very first coalitionmeeting we sought to connect as whole people, slowly building relationships and trust together. We talked about reciprocity and co-created norms for working together that we revisited throughout the year. We frequently used "fist of five" voting to ensure everyone was being heard. And at the end of every coalition meeting, we noticed and reflected on group dynamics with prompts like,
- "Did all members of the group engage equally in today's discussion? Did I create space for less-heard voices? Did I make my voice heard? What factors influenced my choices?"
- "Did you have a moment where you felt like your expertise/experience was more valid than something you heard? How did you respond to that reaction?"
- "How did it feel to work and make decisions when you have different expertise?"

We also sought to be inclusive by attending to accessibility. The coalition employed language translators, including ASL, and used closed captioning. Meetings were scheduled to optimize participants' availability as much as possible, and all meetings were recorded and made available to the public through the state education department's website.

others in their networks to engage.

In Kentucky, the 60 members of the coalition remained committed through an extensive process that some called "challenging" and "uncomfortable at first." But their overwhelming post-meeting feedback was positive. "I am really grateful I was chosen for this work. I look forward to our meetings and recognize the gravity of the task we are undertaking," said one participant.

Even after their collective tasks were completed, several members of the Kentucky coalition raised their hands to help with grant writing for additional funding to support the work, or to continue participating through the KUWL Council and L3s. One of the original student members of the KCAE now serves as the chair of the KUWL Council.

If sustained commitment is one sign of a coalition's legitimacy, another sign is when coalition members approximate elements of the coalition in their own contexts. For example, many of the L3 districts have built their own local coalitions, modeling them after the state coalition, as they prototyped innovations in assessment and accountability. In Boone County, one of the L3 districts, Deputy Superintendent James Detwiler was so inspired by the state coalition's practice of empathy and inclusion that he revamped his training program with school principals to include empathy interviews with Spanish-speaking families, facilitated by his L3 co-chair who leads a local nonprofit.

3. Some tasks must be co-created from beginning to end(ish).

In our 2020 paper, we described respective roles that state and local leaders could take on as they jointly pursue systems change. At the time, we conceptualized these roles as separate but complementary: districts would "assume leadership for organizing primary stakeholders and partners in local 'laboratories of learning,'" while states would be "responsible for animating the work, engendering trust and commitment to a new path forward, converting local insights into systemic transformation, and providing oversight that ensures equitable learning supports for every child."

Indeed, we've seen these complementary roles play out in Kentucky. Districts take the lead on innovating assessment and accountability models that advance local goals, while the state acts to both support and learn from local innovation.

At the same time, however, we've come to understand that some tasks cannot be completed by one group or the other (state or local) but must be completed together – co-created between system leads and stakeholders from the very start.

Some of the tasks that require co-creation are foundational, like taking stock of how people experience the current system including its strengths and weaknesses; identifying root causes for system shortcomings; envisioning a desired "future state"; and identifying priorities to bridge the gap between where we are and where we want to go.

Traditionally, central office leaders complete these foundational tasks in closed rooms, often with the help of outside consultants. Sometimes, they lean on stakeholder feedback from one-off surveys or focus groups. Rarely, however, are these tasks completed with stakeholders as equal participants with equally authoritative viewpoints. Rarer still are the resulting products presented to stakeholders for final editing, approval or ongoing oversight to ensure that what is said is done.

Glass and Flanagan **took a new path** and asked their respective stakeholder coalitions to co-create visions and plans together. At times that meant slowing down to build consensus and insisting that participants gather and make sense of their own data. In Flanagan's words, it also meant resisting his instinct to "tighten up" the plan by himself, remembering that it had to remain a full team effort.

Sometimes, co-creation required leaders to work with other influential players, such as board members, to manage timelines and set expectations around these other players' control over process and outcome. In both Burlington and Kentucky, leaders helped bridge understanding by including some board members as coalition participants, too.

One thing we're continuing to learn about is how to determine which tasks need to be co-created, and to what extent. The practical and relational benefits of co-creation must be weighed against the burden placed on participants and the constraints imposed by external deadlines. To quote C!E partner Doannie Tran, we often found ourselves asking, "Is the juice worth the squeeze?" We didn't try to answer that ourselves, but instead asked the coalitions to determine what **levels of co-creation** were desired for which tasks.

Ultimately, there's no way to shortcut the kinds of trust and co-ownership that co-creation processes can engender. And, as the Kentucky and Burlington initiatives move from co-creation of a vision and plan into a new phase of ongoing implementation and monitoring, we will continue to learn about big and small ways that system leaders can maintain transparency, dialogue and mutual agreement with their stakeholders.

Co-creation may look different over time, but the invitation to jointly steward the work never ends.

4. The ultimate outcome is a different, more reciprocal accountability.

What does this new path yield?

In our 2020 paper, we envisioned three types of outcomes:

1. A variety of models, prototypes or elements that improve local systems of assessment and accountability and can be approximated elsewhere in the state at increasing scale;
2. Changes in the structures and dispositions of local systems that, when a tipping point is reached, trigger statewide — and potentially, national — systems transformation; and
3. "Muscle tone" (i.e. capacities, attitudes and trusting relationships) supporting a reciprocal approach to accountability in which responsibility for outcomes is shared across all levels of the system.

The first two outcomes (a variety of local innovations and changes in local policies and practices) are easy to spot. For example, Kentucky's L3s are pursuing several **district-based innovations in competency-based assessment and accountability**, and with the support of a federal Competitive Grants for State Assessments award, the KUWL Council stands ready to channel local momentum into statewide systems change.

Beyond these tangible outputs, however, we've learned that the greater gain of this approach is the third outcome: a new kind of accountability. This accountability is one that does not rely on paternalistic notions of commanding and controlling compliance, but rather builds reciprocity between state leaders and stakeholders through "honest conversations, follow through and mutual support," as Glass describes it.

Take, for example, the November 2022 KUWL Council meeting in which 20 L3 districts showcased their recent work on local assessment and accountability innovations. One attendee from the Department of Justice asked whether the innovations are having a positive effect on the young people in her care. Glass noted that, "at this stage, the answer is, we don't know yet." But the council agreed to work on defining and measuring impacts on at-risk youth and have the attendee come back in six months to look for progress in that area. "So they're not just reporting out," said Glass. "They're responding to each other and sharing insights, coming up with more optimal solutions."

It also looks like the parent in the introduction to this report speaking up, sharing ownership of Burlington's strategic plan, and joining the steering committee to make sure what is said is actually done.

In fact, we caught another glimpse of reciprocity in action when we asked our district contacts in Burlington to review a draft of this paper. Rather than speaking for their community, they shared the draft with parents and students on the steering committee to "gut check" what we wrote.

Some weighed in, including the parent we just mentioned, and wanted to clarify one point about reciprocity: Trust is indeed an important outcome from their coalition work, they said, but leaders can lose trust if they are too slow to follow through. As one parent said, "There are community members suffering daily from the oppressive systems we are trying to fix." The exchange was both an example of mutualistic relationships between education leaders and community members, and a reminder that reciprocity can't wait forever.

It's time for a new path forward.

These days, it is hard to find anyone defending the old era of state-driven systems change whole cloth. More and more, people from the streets to statehouses acknowledge that "No Child Left Behind," the federal law that ushered in our current era of standardized tests, and its model of top-down accountability ("trust but verify") has become unwieldy and paradoxical. In reality, more verification signals less trust, which only seeds further distrust. It's a self-reinforcing cycle that creates unproductive, adversarial relationships between schools and communities and the district and state systems meant to support them.

And it perpetuates fear that paralyzes leaders from innovating to better meet the real wants and needs of their students, families, and communities.

We proposed a new path forward, and bold leaders like Glass and Flanagan took it on. This paper is our attempt to share what we've learned from them about the key features — like **inclusion, empathy, co-creation and reciprocity** — that make such efforts more likely to succeed.

We're not alone in what we've learned. Principles of "inclusive co-creation" are already transforming related fields of technology and innovation (through design thinking and human-centered design), business management (through **complex adaptive systems science**), and research (through **improvement science**, **participatory action research** and **design-based implementation research**). The impact of each approach is evident in technology that better meets user needs, leaders who can dynamically shepherd systems they influence but don't fully control, and research that more accurately identifies problems and solutions fit to their context.

In the education field, although some terrain is still being charted, we already see early signs of growing reciprocity and trust in Kentucky and Burlington. We're also seeing increased mobilization of support among stakeholders, from district leaders and legislators to students, families and community members. There is work to do, but the ground for this work is fertile.

To encourage more leaders to join this path to a brighter future, we offer one final thought: A new path requires new expectations for what lies ahead.

Both Glass and Flanagan have been truthful about the need to level-set expectations with their school boards, their funders and their communities regarding the pace of the work and how best to support it. It takes time to form coalitions and build their credibility through deep, highly inclusive, highly relational work. It takes investment in structures that make space for that kind of work, and an ongoing commitment to sustain reciprocal relationships in ongoing ways. And it takes fortitude to shelter the work from political storms while it grows and spreads from the grassroots up. None of this is as simple as **hiring a consultant** to build something for you.

It is, however, the only path toward the kind of solidarity needed to make and hold on to real, equitable and widespread improvements in education. **And isn't that where we're all headed?**