

# A Temporary, Intermediary Organization at the Helm of Regional Education Reform: Lessons from the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative

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The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) was invented in 1995 as an ad hoc intermediary organization. It was created in response to a national challenge from philanthropist Walter Annenberg and his half-billion-dollar gift to American public education. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation responded with \$25 million to support the creation of a San Francisco Bay Area regional education reform initiative. BASRC was charged with the goal of stimulating and supporting education reform in the Bay Area and working to close the achievement gap among students of different race and language backgrounds. During its 10-year history, BASRC pursued its mission by making grants to support schools' reform work and establishing a regional collaborative of member schools, districts, support organizations, and funders. BASRC's reform efforts proceeded in two phases. During Phase I of its work (1996–2001), BASRC funded 86 “Leadership Schools” in 6 Bay Area counties. By the fall of 1999 the initial \$50 million had been matched by \$62 million more in public and private funds.<sup>1</sup> During Phase II (2001–2006), BASRC invested in reform efforts in four *focal* districts and featured coaching as a reform strategy. The Hewlett and Annenberg Foundations provided \$40 million in funds and other sources contributed a total of about the same amount. Throughout, the Collaborative's signature reform tool was the school-based Cycle of Inquiry, in which teachers used student data to assess and plan for instruction.<sup>2</sup>

## BASRC's Organizational Form

BASRC was an organization of a particular stripe. As an *intermediary*, BASRC operated between districts and schools and funders. The Collaborative vetted

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<sup>1</sup>BASRC's regional membership also included an additional 146 Membership Schools, 40 districts, and several regional school reform support organizations and foundations which participated without funding.

<sup>2</sup>See McLaughlin and Mitra (2004).

participation in the reform effort, carried out an oversight role, and enacted a vision of whole school/whole district reform. As a *temporary* organization, funding periods defined its lifespan. According to a founding board member, there was never any intent to make BASRC a permanent addition to the Bay Area's education landscape.

Intermediary organizations have evolved as a response to a number of policy problems – how to make effective use of scarce resources, how to foster the spread of ideas and technologies, and how to coordinate missions across organizational and political lines. Likewise, temporary structures spring up in both public and private sectors to carry out special missions. Though both organizational forms are valued as promising policy responses, empirical research about the function and contribution of temporary intermediaries is limited. This chapter draws on 10 years of site-based and survey research in BASRC schools and districts to consider BASRC as a temporary intermediary charged with regional education reform. As background for the analysis, we first discuss the general opportunities and challenges associated with intermediary organizations and temporary structures. To identify and illustrate lessons for policy and practice, we then turn to BASRC's experience as a temporary intermediary charged with bringing about education reform in the San Francisco Bay Area.

### *Intermediary Organizations*

The appearance of intermediaries in both public and private sectors reflects the contemporary appeal of interactive, boundary-spanning organizations dispatched to connect organizations and individuals. Intermediaries of various descriptions generally are capacity-building organizations, operating to increase the capability of individuals, organizations, or systems.<sup>3</sup> Several features of intermediary organizations make them uniquely suited to play the roles of connector and broker. Many intermediaries are non-system actors and so have flexibility not available to public agencies. They enjoy multiple connections and complex relationships that permit them to act across institutional domains. Intermediaries such as BASRC live “at the boundaries. . .neither ‘of’ the system nor wholly outside it” (McDonald, McLaughlin, & Corcoran, 2002, p. 6). A positional aspect that adds value is their “betweenness” (Botes & Mitchell, 1995; Scott, 2003). Intermediaries can move between public and private agencies, individual and organizational concerns, and institutions with a nimbleness typically unavailable to bureaucracies or public agencies. Intermediaries “add value to the world mostly through what they enable *other* players to do (or do better)” (Briggs, 2003, p. 3).

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<sup>3</sup>Initial conceptions of intermediaries featured them as mediating structures linking “the individual in his private life and vast institutions of the public order” (Berger, 1976; Kerrine & Neuhaus, 1979, p. 10). Subsequently, intermediaries' roles extended to include inter-institutional and inter-organizational transactions of various sorts.

However, intermediaries wrestle with their own set of positional challenges. Intermediaries such as BASRC must determine the appropriate balance between delivering their own vision and building the capacity of the organization they are trying to help (Sherman, 2002). To what extent does an intermediary see itself as transforming the field by imposing knowledge and skills, versus supporting a change that is coming from within the organization with which it works (Wynn, 2000)? Similarly, staff experience and background influence relationships intermediaries can establish with focal organizations and the organization's credibility (Honig, 2004). Do actors associated with an intermediary have credibility in the array of institutions with which they interact?

A related challenge involves establishing channels to enable a two-way communication between the intermediary and its target – channels that provide ongoing information about what client organizations need and enable intermediaries to be responsive in a dynamic environment. Briggs (2003) describes the environment in which intermediaries exist as “fluid, where demand for what they do can shift or erode, where the functions of intermediaries and other players may overlap, where the rules are ambiguous” (p. 2). Responding strategically to clients' shifting and evolving needs requires that intermediaries know what is needed when and are able to scan the environment and adapt well (Briggs, 2003, pp. 9–15). Funder relationships also test many intermediaries when they seek to attend to funders' interests while remaining faithful to their own goals as an organization, a problem of serving “many masters” (Briggs, 2003).

### ***Temporary Organizations***

Temporary organizations such as BASRC are created with a specific purpose and duration in mind. They are “defined as a set of diversely skilled people working together on a complex task over a limited time period” (Goodman & Goodman, 1976, p. 494). Temporary organizations assume varied forms and missions – such as presidential commissions, task forces, negotiating teams, research and development projects, and structures charged with providing a particular service. Their charter confines their mission and the organization's termination is tied to a specified time or event – when the commission or task force completes its work, and when an experiment, pilot project, or reform initiative ends. “These new structures are *themselves* innovations in the larger system – innovations designed to further installation of other, more specific innovations in target systems” (Miles, 1964, p. 19n).

Temporary organizations are created to do something that existing, permanent organizations cannot do, or accomplish easily. Typically they are invented to bypass “anti-change” elements in permanent organizations, to focus on a problem outside the purview of existing systems, or take on a problem for which permanent organizations have no regularly specified procedures or capacity. “They are formed with a sense of making a difference” (Goodman & Goodman, 1976, p. 496). Temporary organizations are distinctive in their ability to focus on a discrete task, and operate on

a narrowed, finite time table. To accomplish their charge, they need to keep a steady pace and cannot put off decisions in the way permanent organizations often can.

Time presents perhaps the greatest problem to both the temporary system and the organizations or systems it seeks to influence. Many temporary organizations operate under unrealistic timelines – constraints imposed at their creation that often reflect insufficient initial understanding of the scope and complexity of the task assigned. Further, temporary organizations' schedules as developed by funders or commissioners often overlook or minimize the start-up requirements of getting a new structure staffed and up and running. Implicit in the plans for temporary organizations frequently is the assumption that they will be “good to go” once the doors are opened and the first check is cut. Yet, staffs responsible for carrying out the organization's work need clear specification of rules, expectations, and procedures. These organizational processes and procedures take time to establish, yet funding and activity schedules often neglect this important management task for the new, temporary organization (Miles, 1964). Temporary organizations also commonly experience difficulty establishing effective, credible channels of communication with clients in permanent systems. Building the relationships essential to an effective communication strategy takes staff-intensive effort – a resource in short supply in a temporary organization on a fast pace to meet ambitious goals.

The “extra-system” character of temporary organizations provides flexibility and protection from the daily pressures felt by actors in permanent systems. This feature permits single-mindedness but it also can isolate temporary organizations and their staff from real-world dynamics. Being cut off in this manner can generate “them/us” divisions and “boutique” products impractical in the everyday context of permanent organizations. The education reform arena is replete with examples of initiatives nurtured in a special project setting but unsustainable once special funding and attention end – pilot projects that led nowhere.

Miles (1964) and others who study temporary systems comment on a tendency toward “grandiose, unattainable goals” (p. 481). Unrealistic goals may reflect the relative freedom from the constraints of permanent organizations and the warrant to think broadly. But they can also be “excessively noble in sentiment and impossibly difficult” (op. cit.). Temporary organizations walk a fine line between imagining the innovative “out of the box” plan for action, and simultaneously considering the doable.

And, temporary organizations often confront resistance *because* they are temporary. Perhaps nowhere more than in the field of education are actors cynical about the “flavor of the month” or the next good idea brought into a district by a well-intentioned group or task force. Educators often dismiss projects associated with temporary organizations as efforts to be endured but ultimately dismissed as “here today, gone tomorrow” resources. Temporary organizations such as BASRC, then, face special obstacles when it comes to handing off their efforts to permanent systems. Have they fostered change in attention, systems, and resources that will be continued, or will the target organization return to the *status quo* once the temporary structure is dismantled?

## **BASRC in Action**

BASRC's founding was big news; the size of its purse and its ambitious, innovative mission created significant buzz in the Bay Area public education community.<sup>4</sup> BASRC brought a vision of regional educational reform, tools and strategies for achieving this vision, and resources in the form of dollars and technical supports. BASRC's theory of change featured elements of school and district culture it assumed essential to improved student outcomes – a professional learning community focused on inquiry and evidence-based decisions about practices. In many respects, BASRC functioned as planners and funders intended, moving between schools, districts, support providers,<sup>5</sup> funders, and others to advance its mission of regional reform. In other respects, the Collaborative fell short of its goals; many schools and districts struggled to carry out BASRC's mission and among those that did, the end of the initiative saw serious questions of sustainability.

Many of these shortfalls can be understood in terms of BASRC's organizational form. Here we explore the strengths and weaknesses of BASRC as a temporary intermediary. First, we look at the roles BASRC assumed and the ways in which it added value and promoted reform. Then we turn to the challenges that frustrated BASRC's efforts. What factors in the sites and the Collaborative itself account for the significant variation seen in the implementation and outcomes of BASRC's efforts? Finally, we consider the lessons BASRC's experience teaches about the role and function of a temporary intermediary at the helm of regional education reform.

### ***BASRC as Reform Agent***

The Collaborative constructed three broad roles to implement its reform goals: *grant maker, broker, and educator*.

*Grant maker:* BASRC acted as a scout for funders, establishing application and vetting procedures for the schools or districts. Funders expected that BASRC would develop a reform with coherence at the initiative level, capable of generating regional reform capacity. Through its support of Leadership Schools and focal districts, BASRC re-granted over \$100 million to support locally proposed reform efforts. Not surprisingly, educators were positive about BASRC's funding for their reform efforts and appreciative of the Collaborative's flexibility compared to that of public agencies. They also were positive about BASRC's accountability strategy, the Review of Progress – a strategy designed to establish and enforce standards for self-regulation and mutual accountability among its members. The R.O.P. process asked schools to document their reform progress and state their plans for the following year. This document underwent a peer review process by colleagues and

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<sup>4</sup>Wildermuth (1995).

<sup>5</sup>BASRC termed individuals and organizations providing technical assistance to BASRC schools "support providers."

BASRC coaches through the local collaborative network. Ultimately, the R.O.P. was intended as a way for BASRC to hold schools accountable for making reform progress and to provide guidance to schools as they refined their reform goals.

*Broker.* BASRC played different brokering roles at different times and for different constituencies. Sometimes the Collaborative connected individuals and groups both inside and outside the system. For instance, BASRC brokered relationships with other support providers such as content-focused professional development on reading. At other times, BASRC brokered knowledge, by helping to translate, coordinate, and align perspectives on reform practices within and across the regional participants.

BASRC defined its broker role in two complementary ways: as a builder of ties and as a convener of stakeholders. BASRC brought educators together from a wide variety of school contexts through its Summer Institutes, role-alike networks, and Best Practices Institutes. Participants generally viewed these activities positively. A number of district administrators and principals commented that they had few opportunities to engage with educators outside their district and that they found these cross-school and -district conversations stimulating and valuable.

Despite the value experienced by those who participated in these opportunities to connect with other educators and experts, these brokering efforts experienced limited success. Attendance was spotty; competing demands for time and attention figured prominently as obstacles. Though a temporary organization operates in time and space apart from the permanent organizations it seeks to inform or change, the individuals who are the focus of such efforts rarely have the luxury to suspend their daily responsibilities. And the sprawling geography of the Bay Area region meant that participation in BASRC events required significant commute time, extending time away from schools and offices. The BASRC-supported professional exchanges educators reported valuing most involved opportunities without demands of travel and daylong meetings. For instance, though almost half of the principals reported that they had not attended a BASRC regional convention, nearly half said that they found opportunities to work with other schools in their district's local collaborative very or extremely useful. Similarly, a district administrator said that BASRC's local collaborative strategy "opened up an opportunity for us to join in partnership within our own district that we might not have thought of." BASRC's most effective brokering supports ultimately may have existed in the relationships and structures it built on the ground, up-close rather than regional exchanges.

*Educator.* Central to BASRC's educator role were strategies, tools, and technical assistance for teachers and administrators to learn about the Cycle of Inquiry, its foundational process for using data to investigate practice and plan for change that promised to increase student achievement. During Phase I, that support featured workshops and Summer Institutes as well as on-site assistance from BASRC staff. During Phase II, BASRC supported coaches at both school and district levels to provide hands-on assistance with the Cycle of Inquiry and other elements of its reform vision. Many teachers and administrators said that they would not have made progress in the areas of evidence-based decision making and comfort with data without BASRC. A teacher commented:

BASRC's biggest contribution—they made you do these Cycles of Inquiry. Initially like “oh my God.” But in retrospect, in addition to all of the staff development and materials, were the concepts and structures and systems that would never have been established had it not been for their guidance and requirements.

Some administrators described BASRC's concentration on inquiry in terms of culture change. “This has been a major shift—really looking at what we do, what we need based on data, based on how well we know the district. [The BASRC coach] was really able to pull it together and drive it home.” In particular, they commented about how a major part of the “culture change” BASRC enabled was to get beyond the “culture of nice,” to analyze their own work critically and ask tough questions “. . .and say if that's not working well, then let's throw it out.”

To expose BASRC members to new ideas, the Collaborative offered various 1-day or multi-day sessions focused on promising practices. Presentations by experts provided teachers, administrators, and local collaborative coaches with concrete examples of practices. BASRC's various professional development offerings received generally high marks from participants and positive recognition of BASRC's educator role throughout the Collaborative's duration. A teacher stressed how important it was for a district team to be off-site, hearing about promising strategies, and “talk about some issues that are vital to the district.” Another district superintendent thought “BASRC provides the type of professional development that can grow capacity in a district.”

However, response to BASRC's education efforts was not uniformly positive, and varied in both reception and consequence depending on site or individual readiness to learn. Schools and districts primed to begin, or just embarking on, the use of evidence-based practices were quicker to credit BASRC with building their local capacity. In particular, districts *ready* to engage BASRC's vision reported that the Collaborative's tools, procedures, and coaching enabled them to go to the next stage and, by their report, change culture. BASRC staff's feedback in this context often was deemed “excellent” because “working from the outside, they look at us through a different lens.” Teachers and administrators talked about BASRC as “providing needed focus,” “a facilitator,” “a vehicle for change,” “a kick in the butt,” “an external force to keep you moving,” and “preventing [the district] from staying stuck in management-type things.”

Not all BASRC staff experienced a smooth course working with schools or districts, however. Some coaches described difficulties in using some BASRC tools to help teachers learn. These differences turned less on the nature of the feedback BASRC coaches and others provided than on administrator and teacher willingness to hear critical feedback about the progress of their reform efforts. Across all of the focal districts and schools, BASRC tools, supports, and coaches added greatest value in schools and districts already committed to reform and eager for support. Districts and schools with less concrete engagement with education reform often experienced BASRC's efforts as “all process and no product,” and “providing too little direction.” These different assessments of BASRC's work highlight the significance of “readiness” as an important aspect of BASRC's ability to achieve, given its status as a temporary organization.



Its status as an intermediary provided BASRC a high degree of independence and agency in pursuing regional reform. Participating Bay Area schools and districts valued the Collaborative's flexible organizational structure and resources. However, though BASRC can count some important accomplishments in its decade of regional reform work, it also struggled with many of the obstacles associated with temporary systems and intermediary organizations – challenges that ultimately limited the Collaborative's impact in the region. BASRC's experience provides instructive perspective on the limits of this organizational form as a reform agent.

### *Ambitious Scale and Scope: Struggles with Regional Diversity*

In theory, an intermediary organization ought to be able to educate and build capacity at the same time. In practice, educating and building capacity within a complex, interdependent, and loosely coupled system such as the San Francisco Bay Area proved to be an overly ambitious undertaking. The bold scale and scope of BASRC's work meant that the organization faced the difficult task of providing services and resources across the broad and differentiated population of Bay Area schools and districts. BASRC's reform vision – culture change in schools and districts that supported evidence-based decision making and attention to equity – made the outsider's role an especially challenging one. BASRC was not attempting to “deliver” a well-specified reform package; rather, the Collaborative sought to introduce the tools and habits that would enable participating sites to make fundamental change in the business of schooling and conceptions of practice. BASRC's executive director described it “not as a program but a vision – a vision of what schools should look and feel like.”

The Collaborative's initial 86 Leadership Schools varied significantly in student demographics, faculty background, community contexts, and grade levels. And most important to the outcome of BASRC's work, Leadership Schools joined the Collaborative with substantively different reform histories. Some Leadership Schools had extensive experience with the evidence-based, whole-school reform efforts BASRC promoted. Others, especially schools with a poor track record of student achievement, had little to no experience with the strategies BASRC advanced.

Many schools felt BASRC's tools and strategies did not meet their needs. Schools advanced in evidence-based practices found various BASRC technical assistance and support efforts too elementary, while many schools new to inquiry found sessions too abstract to be useful to them (McLaughlin & Mitra, 2004). BASRC recognized these problems but had insufficient capacity to provide Leadership Schools with tailored supports. BASRC sought to meet requests for site-specific technical assistance by underwriting support providers for each Leadership School. In some instances, these matches were effective; in many others, however, successful matches were not made. Schools discovered that the “pool” of support providers in the region was thin and that available support providers either did not fit their needs



or were ineffective. Staffing constraints, an insufficient number of qualified support providers, and the Collaborative's own relative newness to the enterprise often constrained BASRC to a "transmission" role and, as a teacher put it, "produced lots of big fat binders."

In its Phase II work, to move away from standardized tools and strategies, BASRC hired school- and district-level coaches, as well as local collaborative coaches, to work with teachers and administrators. In practice, however, the work of transforming the culture of even a single district consisting of multiple schools, each with its own different context and needs, proved a complex and demanding task. One way BASRC responded to this challenge was to keep its tools and technical assistance relatively non-specific in terms of content. This strategy reflected a philosophical commitment on BASRC's part to site-based input and local development of specific reform plans and strategies. But this approach left many responsible for carrying out reform efforts in schools and districts frustrated and unclear about how to proceed. As a reform coordinator in a focal district put it, "BASRC staff contributed with implementing change without a recipe but with the ingredients." It soon became apparent that in schools and districts lacking substantial experience with inquiry, more concrete guidance was needed – especially in light of the relatively limited timeframe under which reformers were operating.

Many protocols ran into problems because of the significant variation among settings in which they were used. In some schools, protocols did not connect with teachers' day-to-day realities; in others, protocols were ineffective because, as a coach put it, "the protocol didn't teach them anything new." The Literacy Learning Communities or the Equity Learning Communities BASRC introduced as a way to support teachers' implementation of reform strategies never came together for similar reasons. The diversity of teachers' experiences, expertise, and commitments to various literacy programs meant that a single "curriculum" or focused discussion was difficult to stage.

### ***Ambitious Goals: Too Much, Too Soon***

BASRC's goals were broad and ambitious – in retrospect, too much so given the organization's capacity and timeline. The Collaborative was commissioned to "close the achievement gap," to build appetite and capacity for regional change – a breath-taking charge resonant with worries about temporary systems, that in the presence of high-flying, unattainable goals, "failure and disenchantment are practically guaranteed" (Miles, 1964, p. 481). BASRC's status as a regional intermediary stretched its capacity to respond effectively to the diverse needs and experience of participants. Its temporary status compounded the problem. Since the Collaborative was not in it for the long haul, many schools and districts poised to take advantage of BASRC's resources were unable to reach "take off" point during their participation in the Collaborative. This outcome might have been different had BASRC been able to target intensive, site-specific resources. The Collaborative had insufficient organizational capacity to scan the region for these resources. But even if its plan

of action had allowed such focusing, its temporary status made BASRC relatively inflexible in terms of pace of change, and so unable to make the adjustments in timelines and expectations a permanent intermediary could.

### ***Staffing Issues and a Tight Timeline***

BASRC introduced its two-tier coaching strategy – executive coaches to work with the superintendent and school coaches to work at the school level – as a way to honor the organization’s belief in the importance of ground-level development while also providing material, specific implementation assistance. Though BASRC expended much effort and many resources to do a better job of supporting the reform progress of its diverse membership, the Collaborative’s coaches struggled with their task.

BASRC’s coaching staff, though they were educators with substantial reform experience, generally did not bring the background needed on the ground. Coaches shared no common experience with each other and in some instances even with their “coachee.” For example, only one of the BASRC school-level coaches had been a principal. And though all executive coaches were former superintendents, only one of the executive coaches engaged to “teach” BASRC had previous district experience with BASRC. Further, one executive coach questioned “the assumption that if you hire people who have been successful superintendents, that was going to be good for coaching. . .”

In addition, the Collaborative’s coaching staff was new to the challenges before them. Their own lack of clarity about their roles and the expectations hampered their ability to promote BASRC’s vision or bring coherence to the initiative. The coaches had little opportunity to develop a shared understanding about ways to respond to members’ different styles, needs, and expectations. As a consequence, both executive and school coaches were uncertain about how much latitude they had to create site-specific plans. The local collaborative coaches (LoCoCos), who were district employees hired to support BASRC’s work in the district, also wished for more role clarity. But perhaps more important, they wished for more time. LoCoCos often felt overwhelmed. They described their coaching role as “like a second full-time job.”

These staffing issues with BASRC coaches responsible for carrying out Phase II reform work in focal districts and schools meant that, in practice, BASRC’s coaching model was unevenly implemented and the pace of the reform left little opportunity for mid-course correction at any level.

### ***Sustaining Reform: Managing the Handoff***

Temporary organizations such as BASRC must, at some point, hand off their work to permanent organizations. Creators of temporary organizations expect that these provisional resources will engender change in systems, organizations, and individuals – new practices that are incorporated into permanent organizations’ routines and norms. On sustainability grounds, BASRC’s impact on Bay Area education has been

disappointing. The Collaborative did accomplish some changes in district systems, but they were few. In one focal district, the local collaborative structure is in place, which “would not have happened” without BASRC. In other districts and schools, some BASRC practices remain, such as “selecting and tracking target students” and convening school leadership teams.

Signs are that the reforms BASRC championed will fade in many schools and districts. For example, though several BASRC Phase I schools that were in Phase II focal districts continued and deepened their inquiry-based reform work, by 2005, schools new to BASRC had caught up, with teacher survey data showing the same inquiry levels. However, both groups showed decline during the final year when BASRC funding support had been reduced, suggesting that inquiry practices had not been embedded in school culture in ways that were sustainable in the longer term, even in schools with almost a decade of BASRC experience. One district administrator says that in order to sustain the district’s conversations about evidence-based learning it needs “to continue its relationship with BASRC” because the “personnel resources and . . .the opportunity to talk about education . . .at different levels” is even more helpful than the financial resources. The district has not created its own internal structures and knowledge resources to continue these sorts of cross-level educational conversations when this temporary system disappears. According to their BASRC executive coach, BASRC’s failure with this district is “sobering, given how many resources and how much time has gone into that district.”

The lack of adequate resources comprises a significant obstacle to sustainability. BASRC’s flagship reform, the Cycle of Inquiry, requires dedicated staff and attention. It is not a reform to be “learned” and then considered self-winding. Change of the sort BASRC promulgated and tools such as the Cycle of Inquiry require ongoing learning and support if they are to deepen, spread, and retain vitality. The Cycle of Inquiry requires time for individual practitioners to collect and analyze data as well as reflect on practice. These activities must in turn be supported by data collection and analysis capacity at both the school and district levels. When BASRC funding ended, so did dedicated attention to a Cycle of Inquiry in most all schools and focal districts. As a temporary intermediary, BASRC introduced reforms that generally could not be sustained by existing district budgets and staff – especially in a context of high stakes accountability and state mandated curriculum – even when administrators were supportive.

Significant turnover in district and school staff also compromised the sustainability of BASRC tools and vision. The reform BASRC brought to participating schools and districts was not one of simple activity structures, but one that assumed change in organizational culture, norms, and expectations. So as staff left, so did the vision. Further, BASRC’s executive coaches worked only with the superintendent – other central office administrators were not included in coaching or, in some instances, in feedback sessions. BASRC elected this strategy on the assumption that Superintendents would be most comfortable and candid in a one-on-one coaching format. However, this tactic meant that other central office administrators were not brought into the district reform effort in a meaningful way, and so were unable to

provide substantive support. Yet, experience teaches that middle management backing is key both to implementing and sustaining district-wide reforms (Spillane & Burch, 2004).

All of these factors contributed to a survey-based conclusion of little “BASRC district effect.” Responses from district administrators in districts participating in Phase I *and* Phase II show no significant differences over time (1998–2004) in their assessments of “district reform leadership” or “central office reform culture” – two scales measuring key aspects of BASRC’s focal district strategy such as support for schools’ focus on teaching and learning and use of data as a basis for decision making (reform leadership), and district’s active involvement in school reform and district administrators’ learning (reform culture).<sup>6</sup> However, a modest “BASRC effect” is evident in the 4 Phase II focal districts. Compared to 11 non-focal districts, they started with lower district indicators of reform culture and caught up to or surpassed the non-focal districts on measures of distributed leadership; district central office reform culture at the end of Phase II. Survey and interview data suggest that some BASRC-related change in district office culture was beginning to occur as the initiative drew to an end.

As a temporary organization, BASRC could not continue supports for participating districts once its funding came to an end. Because the Collaborative did not achieve the degree of system and organizational change it sought, it was unable in most cases to hand off its reform strategies and programs. The overall demand on participating schools and districts made by BASRC strategies and vision was greater than could be sustained on a permanent basis, all things equal. Despite funders’ intent and the Collaborative’s innovative work, BASRC in the end functioned more as a “special project” than the transformative force for education reform its supporters imagined.

## **Lessons for the Field: Temporary Systems, Intermediaries, and Culture Change**

Can a temporary intermediary organization stimulate and sustain learning and growth on the ground? The response, drawing on BASRC’s experience, is “it depends.” The success of an ad hoc reform intermediary hinges critically on the readiness and capability of target organizations to take advantage of the tools and resources it provides, connections to additional resources it facilitates, and the school and district subscription to the overall operating vision. In BASRC’s case, its status as a temporary intermediary compromised its ability to be an effective outside reform resource. In hindsight, this shortfall reflects to a significant extent the mismatch between BASRC’s timeline and the pace of reform progress in many participating districts. Many schools and districts simply were not ready or able to engage the reform process BASRC assumed, and BASRC had neither

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<sup>6</sup>BASRC District Administrator Survey – 1998, 2002, 2004.

the time nor the resources to respond effectively to these different paces of reform. BASRC's own management strategies are equally important to understanding the Collaborative's relatively disappointing impact on education reform in the Bay Area. In this case we consider lessons for the field based on BASRC's experience.

### *Address Sustainability Issues at the Start*

Temporary organizations assuming a change agent's role must continually attend to sustainability issues once the funding clock starts ticking. Given a limited timeline to meet goals and the challenges inherent in creating sustainable solutions, temporary organizations need to focus on the attitudes and structures necessary to support and sustain the new practices from the beginning of their relationship.

*Commitment.* One important aspect of sustainability resides in the initial commitment of participants. In retrospect, many BASRC staff wonder how committed Collaborative participants really were to making the fundamental changes BASRC advocated – or whether primary motivation for some participants lay in the possibility of new funds.

BASRC conceived of its reforms in terms of learning, and an implicit assumption was made that, once learned and value demonstrated, tools and routines such as the Cycle of Inquiry would be incorporated into school and district practices. Sustainability issues associated with allocation of needed resources – such as funds, personnel, and time – were not addressed directly at the outset. Furthermore, key players in focal districts often did not recognize the kinds of supports that were needed to sustain the work. Even districts inclined to sustain and even extend BASRC reforms found themselves scrambling to do so as funding drew to an end. We saw that while commitment may be an essential element of a successful handoff, more is needed to embed reform goals and practices.

*Organizational "hooks".* A deficiency of organizational "hooks" to which individual participants could attach their new perspectives and learning diminished the spread and sustainability of BASRC tools and vision. A number of teachers commented on the lack of expectations for them to share what they learned at BASRC gatherings, such as the network meetings. Others felt unable to act on BASRC's tools and reform strategies once they returned to their "regular jobs" because they lacked the warrant or support to do so. Explicit understandings and expectations about how the information, tools, and resources BASRC provided would be brought back to districts and schools – and explicit hooks for them – might have broadened their impact on practice or system routines.

Likewise, by expressly defining an "emissary" role for BASRC participants, the Collaborative might have lessened the "them/us" feelings sometimes expressed by non-participants – feelings that BASRC activities and mission had nothing to do with them or that participants received special resources and treatment. In some instances, educators participating in the Collaborative were relatively isolated. In one district, for example, an effective local collaborative structure added sustained value and connections to participants, but created resentment feelings elsewhere in

the district “that some of the schools were the ‘special schools’ that went up and did BASRC stuff, and some of them weren’t.” The whole-school, whole-district message was not uniformly received or understood and BASRC strategies did not address effectively issues of “spread” beyond BASRC participants.

### ***Temporary Organizations Require Strategic Site Selection***

BASRC’s decade at the helm of regional education reform provides clear instruction about the importance of a “match” between the capacities and mission of a temporary intermediary and its reform target. BASRC was most successful in supporting sustainable reform in schools and districts that were ready to take up its vision of reform and experienced in the evidence-based strategies used to advance it. Schools and districts less far along this reform path generally found BASRC’s tools and resources less valuable (funding excepted), and struggled to apply the loosely defined BASRC protocol and strategies to their settings. These sites, just getting started, had scant experience with inquiry and were unfamiliar with a culture of evidence-based reflection and focused critique.

Culture change takes time. But as a temporary organization, BASRC lacked a timeline compatible with this goal. Schools and districts “ready” for BASRC had histories with similar reform strategies; their growth and change with BASRC support reflected much more than their years with the Collaborative. In hindsight, it seems that a temporary organization of BASRC’s tenure is ill-suited to promote a significant normative and skill-based reform in settings lacking foundational experience and readiness. Almost all of the sites were moving toward BASRC’s vision of reform, but more time was needed for them to get there than was available under BASRC’s grant-supported tenure. In these instances, a permanent organization able to partner over an extended period of time and provide “just in time” resources would seem a more effective reform agent. An important lesson from BASRC’s experience is that readiness to pursue a particular reform vision is essential when the reform time frame is delimited and goals are ambitious.

### ***Measurable Goals***

BASRC was “accountability lite.” The Leadership School application of Phase I as well as the needs assessments and related requirements associated with Phase II membership asked educators to set out clear goals and strategies for meeting them. However, little clarity existed throughout the Collaborative’s life about what participating schools and districts were accountable for and on what timeline. Looking back, several BASRC leaders regret the absence of a memorandum of understanding to anchor expectations for both the Collaborative and participants.

BASRC’s single-minded reform focus was not matched in participating districts, especially as state and federal high-stake accountability requirements turned up pressure for improved student achievement. Even without considerations such as

those brought by No Child Left Behind, participating schools and districts by and large did not share BASRC's sense of urgency about either a pace of change or expected outcomes. Thus, as grant periods neared their end, both local educators and BASRC staff were unclear about what was expected of participating schools and districts, and when and how it would be measured. Reflecting on the Phase II experience and its variable outcomes, BASRC's head school coach said "I think we would all agree that from the very beginning we formed partnerships with districts that were rather vague agreements and we didn't really investigate the district's capacity to do the work, certainly at the district level."

BASRC's experience highlights the need for measurable goals and agreed-upon indicators, especially when the relationship is a temporary one aiming at sustainable outcomes. BASRC's executive coach, who initially resisted setting targets because they conflicted with what he called his "constructivist approach to learning," reflected on this lesson: "I want to be clear that the next time we go out with something we want to accomplish, that we're clear about it. . . even if they [participating districts] don't approve the goals, at least we'll have clear, measurable goals [to hold them accountable]."

### ***Balancing the Tension Between Prescribing and Co-constructing***

BASRC's process-heavy approach proved difficult for a temporary organization to execute effectively, especially when its "clients" were a diverse lot. In theory, BASRC's coaching approach might have been a way to create a balance between prescribed practices and local adaptations. However, given the bumpy start of the coaching strategy and the relatively short time it was in place, the Collaborative's experience supplies a cautionary tale about implementation but little solid evidence of the value of coaching as a way to achieve this balance.

Another way to address the diversity in BASRC's clients might involve a differentiated portfolio of tools, resources, and approaches. BASRC had limited success dealing with member diversity across the region. To this point, the head executive coach advised: "Even though lots of money has been poured into these districts over the years, they were not all on the starting block. So their level of readiness to accomplish what we wanted to accomplish was very different. And so we need differential models. We need [models for] places where we start at ground zero, and we need [models] for places where we can enter and really accelerate their movement forward."

In addition to the intrinsic initial value of a diversified portfolio, this capacity in a permanent or semi-permanent intermediary would allow response to any falloff in effort that might occur due to factors such as turnover in leadership or teaching positions. Intermediaries can act as relatively stable actors in the unstable environment in which schools are located. The instability of the political context in which schools reside makes it extremely difficult for schools and districts to adopt a long-term vision for success and then sustain the organizational capacity to achieve this vision over time. An intermediary organization can become the keeper of the vision



and can respond flexibly to fill the different needs that emerge as districts move to implement their reform strategies. However, as a temporary organization BASRC could not assume that role.

### *Managing Temporary Organizations*

BASRC was “building the plane while flying it.” Plans were developed as the initiative went along; tools and strategies were tweaked or modified along the way. Leadership Schools – especially those new to evidence-based reform – found the Collaborative’s ongoing adjustment of protocols and strategies somewhat problematic during Phase I. The significant sea changes of focus on the district during Phase II were even more unsettling to participants. Changes in priorities, direction, or routines that occurred during the first years of the focal district strategy further complicated basic issues such as a lack of clear role definition for coaches and the introduction of insufficiently specific reform tools.

### *Role Clarity*

BASRC’s experience suggests that in order to interpret successfully the Collaborative’s vision – and stay true to that vision – coaches and other staff required a greater degree of clarity than they achieved about both the vision and the practices intended to support it. An executive coach remarked on the absence of a well-developed conception when work began with the superintendents. “When I took this job I knew some parts of it would be under construction, but I thought there would be a more well-thought out model, and there wasn’t. But it has been pretty much ‘stumble your way through’ . . .”

School-level coaches worried from the start about expectations, what they were supposed to do, and how to assess their work. One said: “We’re still trying to figure it out, what our theory of action is . . .” And another pointed to the organization’s own structure as an issue: “We’re independent contractors. There is no loop for us to enter into. We’re sort of out of the loop.”

If time and resources had been dedicated at the outset to allow them to work together to define their roles and establish explicit expectations, the coaches might have achieved the clarity and common language they sought. Role ambiguity created stress within the organization as well. As a temporary organization, the amount of “start up time” that BASRC could afford to spend building its own foundation of resources was limited. The BASRC staff responsible for the school coaching strategy recognized the problems stemming from this initial lack of role clarity:

. . . real live bodies are out in the field every day and they’re doing something. And I have more questions about, (a) what are you doing? Are you clear about the outcomes that you’re hoping to achieve when you’re out there? (b) how does the school work and the district work inform itself?

School and district participants similarly were unclear about their roles and responsibilities to the Collaborative. For example, many Summer Institute attendees were surprised by the expressed expectation that they would take what they learned back to their respective schools and districts, to help others understand BASRC's vision and goals, and to gain support for BASRC-related activities. Additionally, Summer Institute participants repeatedly pointed out that it took them 3 entire days to grasp BASRC's vision and tools, but they would have very limited time in the context of their day-to-day activities to present their knowledge to others.

## Conclusions

Where BASRC's vision of inquiry and evidence-based reform was realized, even if incompletely, the power of its conception of what was needed to bring about education reform (i.e., changes in organizational culture and the integration of evidence-based practices at both the school and district level), as well as the value of the resources it brought to the task were evident. This conclusion from BASRC's 10-year experience confirms funders' and founders' vision about the focus and character of significant education reform, especially reform addressing equity of educational outcomes.

However, other lessons offer a cautionary tale: BASRC's organizational form was ill-suited to its mission and charge. As a regional intermediary with limited capability to differentiate its tools and resources, the Collaborative was unable to provide an effective response to the significant diversity in experience, district contexts, and student demographics existing in its broad membership. Even though BASRC employed application procedures designed to reduce member variability in such important dimensions as reform appetite, buy-in, and capacity, local differences in these elements nonetheless thwarted BASRC in its role as educator. As a consequence, the scope of BASRC's change agent responsibilities overreached the organization's ability to respond in both phases of its work. Over time, BASRC might have been able to evolve a way of working with schools and districts that provided both consistency of vision and opportunities for local adaptation. The Phase II coaching strategy held promise to this effect. But the Collaborative's status as a temporary organization meant that, except for schools and districts experienced in inquiry and ready to take up the reform BASRC envisioned, reformers sought too much, too soon. The organization had insufficient time to work with participants to make adaptations or even to develop the internal community of practice BASRC staff needed to carry a confident, consistent message to schools and districts.

BASRC's experience counsels that a temporary organization generally is a poor choice to bring about change in norms and values, or to teach complex skills of the sort required by the Collaborative's evidence-based reform. For many of participating schools and districts, BASRC's strategies could not be fully mastered and its tools could not be deeply embedded in everyday work in the period of time available. BASRC's experience affirms and illustrates the vulnerabilities associated with both temporary and intermediary organizations (see Table 1). It advises that,

**Table 1** Distinguishing features of temporary and intermediary organizations

	Temporary organization	Temporary intermediary	Intermediary organization
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Created to solve a particular problem</li> <li>● Diversely skilled staff</li> <li>● Decisive actor</li> <li>● Aims for quick results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Flexible actor</li> <li>● Broker</li> <li>● Designed to develop innovative solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Capacity builder</li> <li>● Grant maker</li> <li>● Non-system actors</li> <li>● Connector of disconnected agencies and institutions</li> </ul>
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Limited timeline to:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Build shared understanding of task among diverse, “temporary” staff</li> <li>(2) Develop relationships w/“target” organization</li> <li>(3) Establish effective communication channels</li> <li>(4) Meet own ambitious goals</li> </ol> </li> <li>● Isolated from “real world”</li> <li>● Create sustainable solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Acquiring inside knowledge and legitimacy</li> <li>● Assembling necessary organizational capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Manage own vision with specific needs of target organization</li> <li>● Have needed organizational capacity to:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Scan the environment for needs</li> <li>(2) Respond flexibly to shifting needs in a dynamic environment</li> <li>(3) Manage scale and scope of work</li> </ol> </li> <li>● Manage relationships with funders; serve “two” masters</li> </ul>

to be successful, a temporary, intermediary organization promoting regional education reform needs either to provide specific, discrete assistance, or to be extremely strategic in its choice of reform sites, assuring both readiness for and explicit commitment to reform. BASRC’s mission called for a stable presence in the region, one that was capable of working over time with schools and districts as they developed their reform goals and achieved the degree of readiness necessary to use the rich array of resources the Collaborative provided. Its organizational form frustrated that mission.

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