

Learning From an Adaptive-Consultative Approach: One Foundation's Experience in Creating Systems Change in Education

Srikanth Gopalakrishnan, M.B.A., New Teacher Center; and Hallie Preskill, Ph.D., FSG Social Impact Consultants

Introduction

In many ways, Rowland Unified School District (RUSD), located in eastern Los Angeles County, is like other midsize urban school districts in the country. The challenges it has encountered recently include rapidly changing student demographics, declining student enrollment, increasing numbers of English-language learners, and the impending retirement of a significant portion of its work force. In the spring of 2009, RUSD faced its most trying challenge yet: The economic crisis, coupled with the poor fiscal health of the state of California, resulted in a perfect storm of deep budget cuts. As a result, the school district was forced to cut programs, lay off staff, and dismantle the entire Instructional Services division, which oversaw curriculum, instruction and assessment.

In the midst of this crisis, however, RUSD decided to take a bold step. As other school districts dug in their heels and prepared for the worst, RUSD embarked on a journey to bring forth key elements of an ambitious strategic plan that sought to “transform teaching and learning” through the creation of “a coherent, constantly emerging system.” (RUSD Strategic Plan Document, 2008). One key ingredient that allowed the district to take this risk was its long-term relationship with the Ball Foundation, a private foundation that partners with school districts to improve literacy through whole systems change. RUSD leaders knew they could count on Ball

Key Points

- This article describes a creative relationship between the Ball Foundation and the Rowland Unified School District. The approach was adopted by the Ball Foundation when they observed that grantees who had a closer relationship with them were more successful than those who had a more traditional relationship with them.
- Based on the concept of “adaptive leadership,” the relationship allows for flexibility and a more collaborative approach between the foundation and grantee.
- This approach requires both the funder and the grantee to be committed to learning and adapting strategies as needed to respond to both results and changing contexts.
- The funder must have skills in facilitation and play a much greater role in implementation than in the typical funder-grantee relationship.

Foundation staff to help them think creatively and reframe the budget crisis as an opportunity for deep and lasting change. Ball, on its part, exemplified an alternative approach to traditional philanthropy, which is best described as adaptive-consultative.

Traditionally, philanthropy has been characterized by a foundation supporting a defined program with beneficiaries obtaining funds to implement the program through a competitive grant process. This model has endured over the years and has benefited the social sector in many

TABLE 1 An Adaptive-Consultative Approach Compared to the Traditional Approach to Philanthropy

Traditional Approach	Adaptive-Consultative Approach
Foundation works with a defined program	Foundation works with a set of principles that are adapted to the specific context
Beneficiaries tailor grant request to meet foundation criteria	Foundation tailors intervention to meet beneficiary real-time needs
Foundation primarily provides financial resources in the form of awards, grants, etc.	Foundation primarily provides human resources in the form of facilitation, consulting, coaching, etc.
Focus is more on building skills and competencies	Focus is more on building capabilities and organizational capacity
Evaluation primarily used as accountability tool	Evaluation is part of an ongoing process for learning and growth for both the foundation and the beneficiary

ways, but it has several limitations – including failing to create the depth and scale of impact that foundations intend (Buteau, Buchanan, & Brock, 2009; Grantmakers for Effective Organizations & Council on Foundations, 2009; Kramer, 2009). A main reason for falling short on impact is the underestimation of the role that context plays. What works in one situation for a specific grantee may not necessarily work under different circumstances for other grantees. This is especially true when attempting to create systems change; the complex issues in the social sector simply do not lend themselves to cookie-cutter solutions.

The adaptive-consultative approach builds on the notion of “adaptive leadership” that is often required while tackling complex social problems (Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer, 2004, p.23) and is distinguished by two main characteristics. The first is the foundation’s willingness to be adaptive - that is, flexible in terms of goals and methods based on the needs and context of its grantees. The second is the foundation’s ability to be consultative to its grantees. For example, the foundation may provide assistance in the forms of coaching, facilitating, guiding, and supporting grantees to ensure the success of an initiative. An adaptive-consultative approach eschews packaged programs in favor of more organic and co-created approaches. As RUSD Superintendent Maria Ott explained:

This work with Ball is not about imposing a packaged program on the district. Rather, it’s about having someone respecting who we are and what our history

is, and respecting that enough to help us engage in conversation to look at ourselves, to figure out what our strengths are, what our potential is, and what our aspirations as a school district are. (Ball Foundation, 2010)

Table 1 further details how an adaptive-consultative approach is different from more traditional approaches to philanthropy.

This article attempts to capture the essence of the Ball Foundation’s adaptive-consultative approach: how the approach evolved, how it was implemented, what happened when an unexpected obstacle suddenly appeared in the form of an acute budget crisis, and what valuable lessons the Ball Foundation has learned overall. We do not intend this to be a definitive proclamation on the efficacy of an adaptive-consultative approach; rather, it is merely an attempt to illuminate for the field one foundation’s experience in implementing an alternative approach so that others may learn from it.

The information and inferences drawn in this article reflect the formal and informal evaluations of the foundation’s work over the last eight years. Formative evaluations have yielded useful information about how the approach was and was not working and what adjustments and refinements were needed to ensure that progress was being made. Summative studies were conducted to determine the extent to which student outcomes were achieved. In the last three years, particularly in a partnership with Rowland Unified School

Delivered by Publishing Technology to: Srik Gopalakrishnan IP: 64.150.16.9 on: Tue, 31 May 2011 22:41:10 Copyright (c) Johnson Center at Grand Valley State University. All rights reserved.

District, the foundation augmented traditional formative evaluation approaches with a developmental evaluation approach (Patton, 2010). This created a more organic, emergent, and timely evaluation process. For example:

- Appreciative inquiry was used to craft an asset assessment that was implemented toward the beginning of the partnership.
- Real-time narrative data was gathered through a “story project” that collected narratives of personal and organizational transformation from teachers and administrators.
- A “learning history” of the Ball Foundation captured how the work had been conceived and implemented and key lessons that had been learned.
- An evaluation expert was engaged as a thought partner who helped shape the foundation’s thinking about evaluation and provided developmental feedback.
- Debriefs – after action reviews, learning labs, and other reflections and discussions – were implemented on an ongoing basis.

The various sources of evaluative data are referenced throughout the article. In addition, we have specifically integrated the findings from two rounds of formative evaluations conducted in 2009-10.

Evolution of the Approach

The Ball Foundation’s Education Initiatives work was started by its founder, G. Carl Ball, in 1993. A deep and abiding interest in increasing literacy led him to invest his personal wealth in the pursuit of solutions to the systemic problems that plagued public education. As one of the first steps, the foundation commissioned two nationally renowned consortia in the mid-to-late 1990s that studied school reform. These studies concluded that programmatic or piecemeal approaches to education reform had not worked and that what was needed was a systems approach that recognized the inherent complexity of education (Consortium on Productivity in the Schools, 1995; Consortium on Renewing Education, 1998). The consortium studies, along with other emerging evidence in the fields of

organizational learning and educational systems change (Fullan, 1993, 1999) led the foundation to embrace a long-term partnering approach to school-district change.

Schools that directly participated in the Ball Foundation partnership (and thus got the benefit of direct contact with Ball) outperformed schools that did not, based on growth in student literacy scores.

From 2000 to 2006, the foundation engaged in its first round of long-term partnerships with three school districts, in California, Illinois, and Michigan. A cohort model was used whereby successive groups of schools were engaged in professional learning around literacy and school improvement. Ball was heavily involved with the earlier cohort groups – teaching, training, coaching, and facilitating the learning process – and progressively less involved with later cohorts. By 2006, more than half the schools in the Illinois and California districts had participated in the Ball partnership, as had all of the schools in the Michigan district (which was considerably smaller than those in the other two states). Formative and summative evaluations of the first round of partnerships found two key trends that had implications for the foundation’s approach:

- Schools that directly participated in the Ball Foundation partnership (and thus got the benefit of direct contact with Ball) outperformed schools that did not, based on growth in student literacy scores.
- Among Ball partnership schools, the earlier cohorts that had received more personalized attention, coaching, consulting, adaptation, and support, demonstrated a higher level of organizational capacity than later cohorts that received the same information and training, but not the consultation.

TABLE 2 Ball Principles and Implications for Partnership Work

Key Principles	Implications for Partnership Work
Build shared purpose	Bring people together to discover what they really care about and to determine their highest aspirations for students, and invite them into something larger than themselves.
Use inquiry to guide practice	Bring people together in dialogue, learning, and reflection where they ask questions that matter, seek relevant information and data, and plan and implement actions with ongoing feedback.
Build on assets	Identify and build on strengths, values, traditions, practices, and accomplishments.
Create adaptive solutions	Co-create with partners ways to acquire, share, and use information that generate new relationships and connections to solve problems.
Access the capacity of stakeholders	Engage staff, students, families, and community members in learning about the district, sharing what is important, and making choices about what is best for the school district.
Work in systemic ways	Engage people in ways that help them gain access to one another and information about their world, and to see interconnections within the school system as well as with the outside environment.
Attend to content and process	Create learning processes that make meaning and find connections among ideas, people, and situations.

This experience crystallized the significance of an adaptive-consultative approach and also led the foundation to move from a cohort model to a whole-system model of change. In its next round of partnerships that started in 2006, the foundation identified the whole district as the unit of change and intentionally focused on implementing systems change through a clearly defined theory of action. This theory of action, labeled the Ball Approach (Figure 1), was articulated in 2005 and clearly depicted Ball’s adaptive-consultative approach. This depiction served as the basis for the foundation’s conversations with school districts that were candidates for the second round of partnerships. The approach has since evolved further based on new learnings and insights; however, the depiction still represents the fundamental spirit of adaptation and consultation.

Subsequently, the foundation articulated a set of principles to guide its work (Table 2). These principles of organizational learning and change had always influenced the work, but they had never been explicitly outlined and communicated to partners. Making these principles explicit was a way to establish a strong foundation on which the approach could rest. The foundation found that in an adaptive-consultative approach, the impor-

tance of having a set of principles to ground the work was essential.

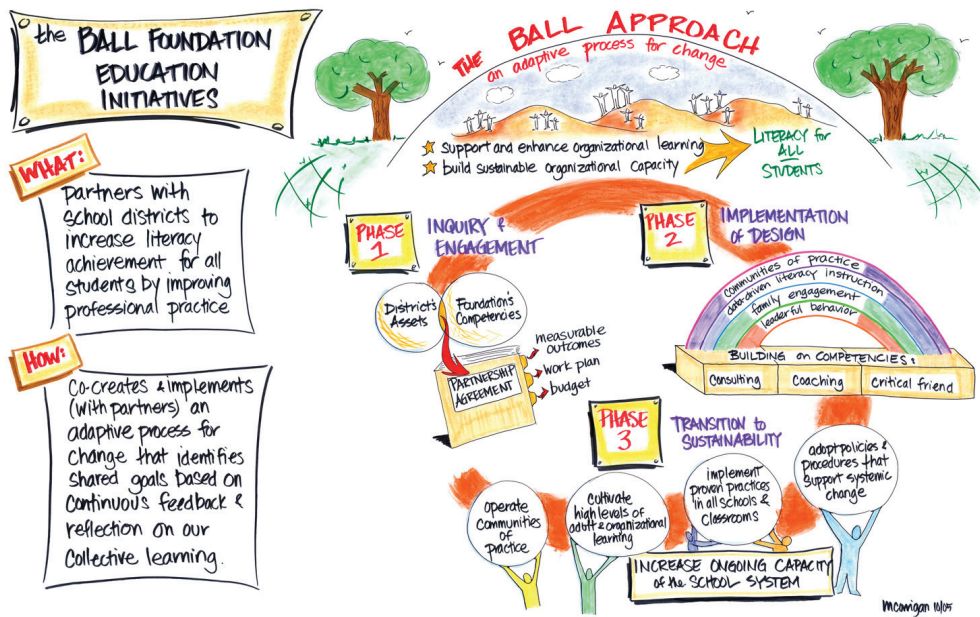
The executive director of the Ball Foundation articulated in the foundation’s learning history the belief that “principles are the genetic code of our work” (Babiera & Preskill, 2011). Another staffer explained: “When you are navigating this complex landscape, you can use these principles as guideposts” (Babiera & Preskill, 2011). As the foundation attempted to implement a truly organic approach that would integrate grantees’ voices into the conversation and decision-making, the principles became the new non-negotiables. The approach did not pre-determine what needed to be done, but the principles created a strong framework to think about how to go about it in an inclusive and democratic way.

Implementation of the Approach

By the summer of 2006, the Ball Foundation was getting ready to implement the adaptive-consultative approach (Figure 1) in its second round of partnerships with school districts. Two districts of roughly the same size, one in California and one in Pennsylvania, were chosen through a multifaceted selection process. In keeping with the principles, the implementation of the ap-

Delivered by Publishing Technology to: Srik Gopalakrishnan IP: 64.150.16.9 on: Tue, 31 May 2011 22:41:10 Copyright (c) Johnson Center at Grand Valley State University. All rights reserved.

FIGURE 1 The Ball Approach



proach started with an asset-based, participatory, system-wide assessment of what was working with respect to literacy. Stakeholders across the school district – teachers, principals, administrators, parents, and students – engaged in collaborative conversations facilitated by Ball. Questions were posed around the meaning and relevance of literacy and the role that the district played in fostering literacy.

A few months into its second round of partnerships, the implementation of the approach hit its first major speed bump. The Pennsylvania school district found itself being challenged by increasing mandates for its performance, and the district inevitably slid into “program improvement” status under the No Child Left Behind Act. The district struggled to meet the needs of program improvement and acknowledged that it simply did not have the time and resources to focus on the Ball partnership. Under the circumstances, in December 2007 the foundation decided to exit the partnership rather than continue a journey that appeared unlikely to produce the intended impact.

A detailed debrief of this experience by the Ball staff, coupled with an evaluation study of the foundation’s selection and initial engagement process by external evaluators, helped harvest several valuable lessons about the conditions that were necessary for the approach to succeed. One of these conditions is the ability of the district to see the Ball partnership work and its ongoing improvement activities as not being in “parallel universes,” but being one and the same. Another condition is the district’s willingness and readiness to embrace the principles of organizational learning and change (Table 2) and enact them in its own system. Doing this requires school-district leaders district to reorient their leadership style, be open to coaching and mentoring, and, most importantly, see themselves as learners. In addition, district leaders need to demonstrate systems thinking skills and have the ability to connect disparate parts of the district under one shared instructional purpose.

While there was a sense of disappointment about exiting the Pennsylvania partnership, the foundation was able to bring the lessons learned to

its remaining partnership with Rowland Unified School District in California. The Pennsylvania experience helped the foundation realize that it needed to actively foster the conditions for success in RUSD. Hence, it became even more important to work in a close consultative relationship with the school district and build leadership and organizational capacity throughout the system. A key first step in doing this was to connect various parts of the district to one another around the common work of classroom instruction.

The data revealed that different and more productive patterns of articulation, collaboration, and communication had been established since the foundation starting working with the district. The opportunity was thus ripe for a deeper dive into improving classroom practice.

Building on the collaborative assessment process, the foundation facilitated a series of “articulation meetings” among K-12 educators in RUSD, starting in the fall of 2007. These meetings were intended to build and strengthen connections across elementary, intermediate, and high school educators, and create shared purpose in the district as a whole. For the first time, kindergarten teachers sat at the same table with high school department heads and talked about common needs and practices. This observation from an elementary teacher illustrates the impact of these articulation meetings:

This articulation between me as an elementary teacher and them as secondary teachers made me realize that we have the same problems, same concerns, and same passion about our students. We all wanted to know, “What else can I do?” I love being in a group

that is proactive and not negative – where we’re putting our heads together to share ideas and strategies and there’s more openness. People were saying: “You can come visit or e-mail me or just call if you want more information.” This kind of meeting was something that had never happened in this district on such a huge scale. (Ball Foundation, 2010)

Over the next two years, the Ball Foundation facilitated a number of processes in RUSD that continued to connect educators and build leadership and organizational capacity. In October 2007, RUSD embarked on an ambitious strategic planning process. Over the next few months, with Ball staff serving as facilitators and critical friends, district leaders identified a mission, vision, and eight key strategies for transforming the district. The 2008-09 school year started with a series of “mission cafés” intended to engage stakeholders around the district’s new mission. Following these were several “immersion days,” designed to give every RUSD staff member the experience of learning in a collaborative and networked way. Each immersion day engaged district staff in conversations about the conditions necessary to foster learning, connected the work around literacy to the district’s strategic plan, and simulated a network where educators shared effective instructional practices.

At the end of an immersion day, an invitation was given to RUSD staff members to be part of a districtwide literacy network. Under the broad umbrella of the literacy network, there would be various “communities of practice” focusing on specific instructional practices. The communities of practice would not only increase their knowledge and skills around particular practices, they would also generate new knowledge that would inform the school district and the broader educational field. The intention was to continue to build RUSD’s capacity for self-directed, teacher-led professional learning, and to connect educators in deep and rigorous conversations around classroom practice.

By the spring of 2009, the RUSD-Ball partnership had created system-wide conversations around student learning and literacy, set in motion a

strategic plan with an ambitious mission, and facilitated the emergence of communities of practice. At this time, real-time narrative data, in the form of the “story project,” were collected by external evaluators from a variety of district staff, who were asked how the partnership had affected their relationships, perceived self-efficacy, instructional practices, and leadership abilities. The data revealed that different and more productive patterns of articulation, collaboration, and communication had been established since the foundation starting working with the district. The opportunity was thus ripe for a deeper dive into improving classroom practice. The partnership, however, was about to face a serious challenge to the work – the looming budget crisis in California. But as Ball and RUSD found, this challenge proved to have a silver lining, since it was in response to the crisis that the benefits of the adaptive-consultative approach became highly apparent.

Impact of the Budget Crisis and Program Improvement

In March 2009, the district was asked to cut more than 10 percent of its budget by any means possible, including eliminating programs and laying off staff. Against the backdrop of the budget crisis, RUSD leaders, with coaching from Ball, initiated an effort to redesign the organization to be more nimble, flexible, and generative in a time of economic and political uncertainty – all in service to better student learning. A think tank of 14 stakeholders representing teachers, principals, central office administrators, and classified staff (those who did not hold a professional certification, such as office assistants, translators, etc.) were brought together in a rigorous organizational redesign process, facilitated by Ball, lasting several months. The think tank’s purpose was to create innovative ways for the district to accomplish its goals more effectively, with fewer financial resources, while fully engaging district stakeholders in the process.

Over the next six months, the think tank members found a way to involve stakeholders, yet stay true to a tight timeline, by adopting an “accordion” model of functioning. The think tank would cast a broad net and engage various large groups

in the conversation; after each engagement, the think tank would meet to process the information, go deeper, and generate more innovative ideas. Ball was a partner in this iterative process – bringing models and exemplars for the think tank to consider, facilitating large groups in productive conversation, and coaching district leaders in this new, democratic way of functioning (Gopalakrishnan, 2010).

Against the backdrop of the budget crisis, RUSD leaders, with coaching from Ball, initiated an effort to redesign the organization to be more nimble, flexible, and generative in a time of economic and political uncertainty – all in service to better student learning.

A seventh-grade teacher who participated in the redesign process had the following to say:

There were no preconceived notions with the restructuring because we were going back to scratch. There was nothing we could fall back on. We only knew what we knew, so the principals came with their knowledge, and the classified staff came with their knowledge, and the teachers came with theirs. We were put in a room all together, and we said to each other, “Oh, I get to see your point and yours. I didn’t realize it’s not as cut and dr[ie]d.” Then we thought, “How can these three groups work well together for the betterment of the students?” Sometimes we said, “Oh my gosh, I jumped the gun. I went too quickly and assumed too much.” Ball made us take a step back and reflect. (Ball Foundation, 2010)

By the end of the process, the district had adopted a set of “valued qualities” that characterized the new system, and a list of “essential functions” that would bring these valued qualities to life. From

these think tanks, three major structural changes emerged:

1. The creation of an Instructional Cabinet, a cross-functional body of 25 stakeholders (teachers, principals, classified staff, and district administrators) who would be responsible for creating strategic direction and priorities around instruction as well as tackling systemic issues such as the achievement gap. The Instructional Cabinet would form work groups to delve into specific issues while continuing to communicate with the rest of the district.
2. The creation of a K-12 structure of schools, supervised by one deputy superintendent, to replace separate elementary and secondary divisions. This K-12 structure was intended to promote cross-level articulation and collaboration and break down the traditional silos between elementary and secondary levels. A newly created cohort of “school instructional leaders,” consisting of teachers and principals from every school, would shepherd the learning in the K-12 community.
3. The creation of the position of “learning directors,” who would be located in schools, but would spend about a third of their time on district-level instructional and coordination issues. This was an attempt to maintain the advantages of decentralization while integrating certain key processes and ensuring coherence.

These structural changes were accompanied by personal changes in knowledge, skills, and dispositions. In the spirit of experimentation that characterized the redesign, the district leaders named 2009-10 a trial year to fully set up and pilot the new structures. Ball staff continued to provide consulting, facilitation, and professional learning to build competencies for systems change, such as tolerance for ambiguity, increased self-awareness, and ability to engage in reflective practice. The various forms of evaluation data revealed that with Ball’s support, the district was able to create a safe space for people to embrace the change process. The following

quote, from a third-grade teacher, illustrates how the process appeared to create more collaboration and transparency:

I have a lot of confidence that we can withstand this restructuring trajectory. I would like to think that every school site will tap into their teacher experts. There is now this sense of respect of each other as colleagues, along with the respect to listen to each other. What Ball has done has really taken people from behind closed doors. That closed-door classroom could become a more open-door, a more transparent one. (Ball Foundation, 2010)

An elementary principal added,

The experience with the budget cuts would have been different if Ball hadn’t allowed us to dialogue with each other, bringing in parties so that everybody understands that there is no preset map of the future. As a result, I think there’s more trust in this district. If we hadn’t worked with Ball during this process, we would possibly have gone back to the old ways – waiting for what’s going to happen from the district instead of taking charge first at the site level. (Ball Foundation, 2010)

A district administrator further expanded on how Ball’s assistance helped build a stronger system:

At this point, we’re in the process of rebuilding, and part of that rebuilding is creating a strong foundation on which to build. I think that Ball has been very instrumental in helping us build that new foundation by looking at new ways of working, new ways of thinking, new ways of designing. The new way we are working is more organic. We’re more relaxed. We’re more concerned now with the content and the quality of the conversations, and we have allowed ourselves the time to think, to share, to question; whereas in the past, that wasn’t really the practice. (Ball Foundation, 2010)

Working closely with RUSD and being in tune with the changing context, the Ball Foundation was able to apply its adaptive-consultative approach in a timely and responsive way to meet the needs of the school district. In the fall of 2009, while still in the throes of budget cuts, RUSD slipped into “Program Improvement”

status, which brought on a whole new set of challenges, mandates, and reporting requirements. With the support of the foundation, the district was able to use the opportunity, just as it did with the budget cuts, as a way to bring key stakeholders together and chart a course of action. The newly created structures were fully put into use. The Instructional Cabinet was tasked with creating an addendum to the district plan detailing steps that would get the district out of program improvement. Under the leadership of the Instructional Cabinet, the addendum was completed and approved by the school board in just over eight weeks. The learning directors led and facilitated several of the conversations and, with the director of curriculum and instruction, formed the core team that wrote the final addendum. Several K-12 structures, including the team of school instructional leaders, participated in thinking about instructional priorities for the district. With Ball's help, RUSD identified "creating districtwide agreements about efficacious instruction" as a key priority for the new school year 2010-11.

Findings From Formative Evaluations

In order to study and document the impact of its approach on the district, the Ball Foundation commissioned two rounds of formative evaluations in 2009-10. The evaluations sought to examine changes in overall district capacity, professional practice, and student learning. Carried out by an external evaluation firm, the formative evaluations included various data collection methods and sources:

- more than 500 responses (both participants and nonparticipants in Ball partnership work) to an online survey,
- 61 interviews (all participants in Ball partnership work),
- observations of 13 Ball partnership learning events,
- immediate feedback surveys from 10 Ball partnership events (632 participant responses), and
- document reviews of artifacts such as agendas for learning events, notes, and memos.

Overall, up until the end of school year 2009-10, 32 percent of the district staff had been involved

with the Ball partnership in some way, beyond participation in immersion days (which involved nearly 100 percent of the district). The formative evaluation findings showed that the Ball partnership had affected overall district capacity, in addition to creating changes in professional practice for teachers and administrators who had high levels of participation. The impact on student learning and achievement has yet to be explored in detail and will be a key focus for the next round of evaluations in 2010-11. The main findings are summarized below.

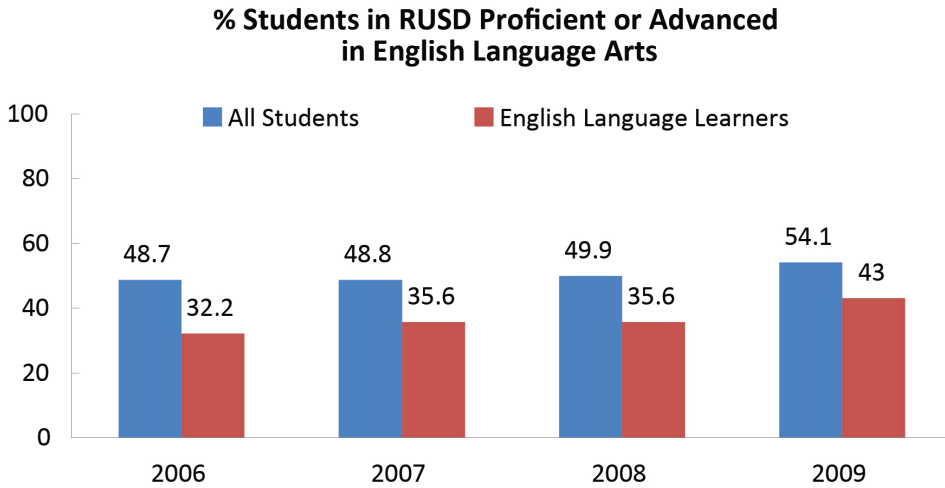
The formative evaluation findings showed that the Ball partnership had affected overall district capacity, in addition to creating changes in professional practice for teachers and administrators who had high levels of participation.

District Capacity

The formative evaluations found that overall district capacity had been built around quality of professional learning, collaboration, decision-making, safety, and creation of a coherent identity. Specifically, evaluations reported the following:

- The Ball partnership positively affected the district's response to its Program Improvement status, making the response more thoughtful and intentional than it otherwise would have been.
- Use of collaborative practices was evident not just in Ball venues, but also in non-Ball venues. A vast majority of participants reported that the partnership helped improve collaboration on supporting literacy learning in the district.
- There was heightened awareness of, and attention to, adult learning processes across various district professional learning venues. Survey results, for example, showed that more than 70

FIGURE 2 Student Achievement in RUSD



percent of participants thought that the partnership had a positive impact on the quality of professional learning across the district.

- There were increased K-12 awareness and conversations that created a greater sense of shared responsibility for all students, regardless of educators' organizational location or position.
- The Instructional Cabinet was seen as a sustainable structure, focusing on the right priorities, such as Program Improvement and district-wide coherence of instructional practices.
- Participants' experience of "safety" in the work was near universal (across various data sources).

Professional Practice

The formative evaluations found changes in professional practice of teachers, principals, and district administrators. These changes were not consistent across the district; however those that had the deepest involvement in the Ball partnership work reported the most amount of change. Specifically, the evaluations found the following:

- A majority of Ball partnership participants reported that partnership activities helped them deeply examine their approach to teaching and learning.
- Rigorous dialogue about instruction was start-

ing to take place in the district. More than three-quarters of partnership participants reported transfer of learning from the partnership around how they prepared for and reflected on instruction.

- Participants in the Ball partnership "literacy network" reported transfer of new instructional strategies to their classroom.
- A structured "learning walk" protocol for classroom observations by peer teachers, often from other schools, was created and implemented with Ball support. This protocol had started gaining wide support and began to move the district towards a culture of openness and collaboration around classroom practice. Many principals indicated that they are changing how they run schoolwide staff meetings to incorporate more inquiry, joint decision-making, and exploration of underlying issues.

District executive leaders demonstrated reflective practice and developed an orientation towards more collaborative and inclusive viewpoints.

Student Learning

While no extensive examination of the partnership's effect on student learning has been done to date, the overall trajectory of RUSD's student achievement over the course of the partnership

has been positive (Figure 2), as measured by the percentage of students scoring at proficient or advanced levels in English Language Arts Standards on the California Standards Test. At the time of writing this article, the 2010 results had not been released in their entirety; hence, we report the scores from 2006, when the Ball partnership began, to 2009. The foundation's previous experience with school districts has shown that significant gains in student achievement do not appear right away and usually follow system-wide changes in professional practice, which as the formative evaluation findings showed was beginning to take place. However, a notable trend in the student results is that English-language learners, a key focus of the partnership, showed double the growth of the student population as a whole (10.8 percentage points compared to 5.4 percentage points for the whole population), thus effectively narrowing the achievement gap. Impact on student learning and achievement will be an explicit focus for Ball partnership evaluation in 2010-11 and 2011-12.

As the evaluation data from school-district staff illustrate, Ball's consulting and coaching activities helped move the district to a higher degree of transparency, reflection, and collaboration. However, the evaluation data also illuminated gaps in the foundation's approach and suggested ways to make the approach more rigorous and effective. Specifically, the evaluations found that while several structures of partnership work were being implemented, there was no formal mechanism to create cross-structure coherence. Some of the partnership work had also been implemented without explicit connections to district priorities. Rigor and accountability was seen as lacking in the early literacy network conversations and the lack of explicit expectations frustrated many of the participants. The evaluation suggested that a reliance on a more organic and emergent approach demanded intensive relationships with key district leaders to shepherd groups and link to district priorities and accountabilities. In addition, the Ball partnership needed to increase emphasis on instructional practices and literacy content if it were to produce deeper changes in classroom practice.

Informed by the formative evaluation findings, Ball staff and RUSD leaders created an action plan for 2010-11 that emphasized sustainability of the work beyond the life of the formal Ball partnership, which was scheduled to end by the summer of 2011. Collaboration, opportunities for reflection, focus on effective practice, peer-based learning, and self-directed inquiry were all identified by RUSD executive leaders as initiatives to be sustained. In addition, the structures created through the partnership, such as Instructional Cabinet, Literacy Network, and school instructional leaders were identified as key ongoing structures of the district that were to carry on beyond the life of the partnership. RUSD leaders also committed to establishing cross-structural links and supporting mechanism throughout the district to ensure coherence across all learning activities.

The evaluation suggested that a reliance on a more organic and emergent approach demanded intensive relationships with key district leaders to shepherd groups and link to district priorities and accountabilities.

Lessons Learned: Perils and Possibilities

As exemplified by the case of RUSD, an adaptive-consultative approach on the foundation's part can provide the kind of agility that is needed in the current volatile context of public education. However, as mentioned earlier, this article is not intended to be a definitive pronouncement on the effectiveness of the Ball Foundation's approach, but rather we wanted to capture and share both successes and possible perils for the purpose of informing the field. While the benefits of this approach may be apparent, the foundation's formative evaluations, as well as ongoing reflection processes, have revealed several red flags. Any foundation going down this path would be

advised to consider the following:

1. The grantee may not want an adaptive-consultative approach. While it promises a greater payoff in the long run, the adaptive-consultative approach is a lot more work for the grantee (and for the foundation). As the Ball Foundation discovered early into its second round of partnerships, not all school districts have the capability or capacity to work with this different approach. Grantees may simply prefer being told what to do.

Rigorous due diligence needs to be conducted to explore the capability and capacity of grantees to work with an adaptive-consultative approach.

2. The foundation may not have the skills to implement an adaptive-consultative approach. Implementing an adaptive-consultative approach requires a fundamentally different set of skills around facilitation, coaching, and designing that program staffs may not possess. If that is the case, the foundation would need to either build these organizational development skills or hire an intermediary organization that could provide them.

3. The approach may be perceived as being paternalistic. The social sector in general, and public education in particular, has been long characterized by outsiders coming in and setting the agenda for change. This has created a culture of dependency on outside expertise, knowledge, and resources. An unintended consequence of this dependency is that the approach may be perceived as paternalistic. The Ball Foundation found that it took time for grantees to realize that Ball wasn't just withholding "the" answer.

4. The pendulum may swing too much in the direction of "process." Adaptation and consultation are ways to make a sound, principles-based approach suitable for a complex and fast-changing context; they are not a substitute for what is known and proven in terms of the content of the approach. The foundation found that this wisdom is sometimes lost amid the excitement of being in fast-moving work. The pendulum may swing too much on the side of flexibility and process, thus overlooking quality, content, and evidence-based decision-making.

5. Evaluation may not fully capture the effects of the approach. Traditional evaluation, with its focus on predetermined and easily quantifiable indicators, may not be equipped to fully capture the systemic effects of an adaptive-consultative approach. Hence, the approach may not be suitable in situations where expectations exist for "proof" of impact through traditional evaluation methodologies alone.

Fortunately, the Ball Foundation's experience also shows that there are ways to avoid the above traps. First, rigorous due diligence needs to be conducted to explore the capability and capacity of grantees to work with an adaptive-consultative approach. While selecting partners for its second round of partnerships, the foundation went through four rounds of information gathering. The last round involved a two-day visit to the school district and face-to-face conversations with teachers, administrators, and parents where the foundation staff members listened a lot more than they talked. While there is no foolproof way to guard against changes in context, well-planned due diligence explores comfort levels on both sides in terms of a different way of working. Another option is to implement pilot projects of smaller scope before embarking on a long-term implementation, thus allowing the foundation and grantee to get comfortable with each other's ways of working.

Second, communicating a clear and powerful core bundle of values, principles, and philosophies can specify how this approach is different. The Ball

Foundation found that the way one communicates and articulates the approach clarifies intention and sets up expectations for both parties. For example, while going through the selection process for its second round of partnerships, the foundation carried a 6-foot by 8-foot poster of the Ball Approach (Figure 1) to various school districts and hung it as a backdrop at every meeting. The aesthetic nature of the picture and its lack of boxes and arrows immediately communicated that this was a different approach. The essence of the approach can also be articulated powerfully through narrative case studies; stories and anecdotes give grantees a deeper sense of how the work will be done.

Last, but not least, building a strong feedback and evaluation cycle informs ongoing learning for the foundation as well as the grantees. In addition to traditional evaluation methods, the Ball Foundation employed more emergent and complexity-friendly techniques, such as storytelling, process mapping, and appreciative inquiry, to illuminate the effects of the approach. In addition to these methods, cultivating a culture of asking questions, seeking answers, and learning from experience is essential. The foundation frequently carried out after-action reviews and debriefs of the work with grantees to explore what was showing up, what was being learned, and what needed to be done differently for the future.

Overall, the role of evaluation has been critical throughout the evolution and implementation of the adaptive-consultative approach. As our work has matured, evaluation has changed and evolved along with it. Developmental studies were crucial in the early stages of conception and design. As the implementation got under way, ongoing formative evaluations generated timely information that allowed the foundation and its partners to make mid-course corrections. As the foundation approaches its last year of partnership with RUSD in 2010-11, a comprehensive summative evaluation is being developed that would ascertain long-term impact on the district and its students. The focus will continue to be on changes in overall capacity and professional practices of adults (e.g., teachers, principals, district administrators) in

the school district with an explicit emphasis on the impact of the partnership on student learning behaviors and student achievement results.

Cultivating a culture of asking questions, seeking answers, and learning from experience is essential.

While more information is needed to conclusively answer questions about the adaptive-consultative approach, the Ball Foundation's experience has shown that, if implemented with fidelity and heart, it promises a deeper, more systemic impact for philanthropic investments. This is especially true in times of fast-moving change and uncertainty. The adaptive-consultative approach provides foundations an opportunity to capitalize on strategic moments to create true systemic change, as happened in the case of RUSD with the budget crisis. In addition, the approach builds the capacity of grantees to cope with change in general and ensures sustainability in the long run as grantees, rather than the foundation, take primary ownership of issues. This is not to say that traditional philanthropy has no role. On the other hand, if the intention is to change the status quo and create sustainable systemic change, then foundations would be well served to learn from the Ball Foundation's experience in implementing an adaptive-consultative approach.

References

- BABIERA, R., & PRESKILL, H. (2011). *Becoming the change: What one organization working to transform educational systems learned about team learning and change*. Glen Ellyn, IL: Ball Foundation
- BALL FOUNDATION. (2010). Poised for change: Stories of personal and organizational transformation. Retrieved from <http://www.poisedforchange.org/>
- BUTEAU, E., BUCHANAN, P., & BROCK, A. (2009). *Essentials of foundation strategy*. Cambridge, MA: Center for Effective Philanthropy.
- CONSORTIUM ON PRODUCTIVITY IN THE SCHOOLS.

- (1995). *Using what we have to get the schools we need: A productivity focus for American education*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- CONSORTIUM ON RENEWING EDUCATION. (1998). *20/20 vision: A strategy for doubling America's achievement by the year 2020*. Nashville, TN: Peabody Center for Education Policy, Vanderbilt University.
- FULLAN, M. (1993). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform*. Levittown, PA: Falmer Press.
- FULLAN, M. (1999). *Change forces: The sequel*. Levittown, PA: Falmer Press.
- GOPALAKRISHNAN, S. (2010). Embracing the "gift story": Organizational redesign in a time of crisis in public education. *Organizational Development Practitioner*, 42(1).
- GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS & COUNCIL ON FOUNDATIONS. (2009). *Evaluation in philanthropy*. Washington, DC: Authors.
- HEIFETZ, R. A., KANIA, J. V., & KRAMER, M. R. (2004, Winter). Leading boldly. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, pp. 21-31. Retrieved from www.ssireview.org/pdf/2004WI_feature_heifetz.pdf.
- KRAMER, M. R. (2009, Fall). Catalytic philanthropy. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, pp. 30-35. Retrieved from http://www.ssireview.org/images/ads/2009FA_feature_Kramer.pdf.
- PATTON, M. Q. (2010). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. New York: Guilford.

spent more than 20 years in academia, teaching graduate level courses in program evaluation, training design and development, organizational learning, appreciative inquiry and consulting. In 2007, Hallie served as the President of the American Evaluation Association. She received the American Evaluation Association's Alva and Gunnar Myrdal Award for Outstanding Professional Practice in 2002 and the University of Illinois Distinguished Alumni Award in 2004. Hallie holds a Ph.D. from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Srikanth (Srik) Gopalakrishnan, M.B.A., is the Senior Director of Impact, New Teacher Center. Srik leads the work of defining, measuring and improving the impact and effectiveness of the New Teacher Center's work in supporting beginning teachers across the country. Previously, he worked to facilitate whole systems change in public education for seven years in his role as Director of Evaluation for the Ball Foundation. He holds an M.B.A. from the University of Michigan Ross Business School, an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology, and Certification in Advanced Evaluation Study from Claremont Graduate University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Srikanth Gopalakrishnan, New Teacher Center, 320 North Elizabeth Street, 2nd floor, Chicago, IL 60607 (email: srik@newteachercenter.org).

Hallie Preskill, Ph.D., is the Executive Director of the Strategic Learning and Evaluation Center, FSG Social Impact Consultants. Hallie guides clients on planning and conducting evaluations, designing evaluation and performance measurement systems, building evaluation capacity, and facilitating organizational learning. Prior to joining FSG, Hallie