

# **PACE analysis of Mills Teacher Scholars: Supporting leaders to develop positive learning cultures 2019-2020**

## **Executive Summary**

Over the 2019-2020 school year, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) worked with Mills Teacher Scholars as a learning partner, focusing on collaboration with district and school leaders in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD). PACE provided feedback from observations of meetings, interviews with participants, and analysis of documentation and survey data. Frequent conversations supported continuous reflection and improvement. This year-end summary captures the big-picture takeaways: what participants valued most from the Mills Teacher Scholars'-facilitated sessions, and what they would like more of in the future.

In both districts, Mills Teacher Scholars worked with a network of roughly 15 principals—elementary in OUSD and secondary in WCCUSD—and about 8 district administrators. In addition to monthly, 2-3 hour-long learning sessions, Mills Teacher Scholars worked with individual school and district leaders to co-design and prepare for sessions. Each meeting included personal check-ins, inquiry focused on data from principals' sites, public learning sessions, and time for individual, small and whole-group work.

Participants in learning sessions reported that they most valued Mills Teacher Scholars':

1. **Consistent Focus on Instruction.** Participants discussed how important it was to get away from the typical day-to-day business and distractions and have dedicated, structured time to focus on both the big-picture and the details of how to implement strategies that promote improvements in the instructional core of teaching and learning. In particular, the public learning practice, including classroom walkthroughs, was cited as extremely valuable.
2. **Support of Relationship-Building and Collaboration.** Participants valued the relationships they nurtured during their time with Mills Teachers Scholars, saying that the collaborative inquiry work gave them social/emotional support as well as the opportunity to engage in practical problem solving.
3. **Relevant and Personalized Content.** Busy principals appreciated that they could bring their own site-specific data and concerns to the table, using Mills Teacher Scholars' practices to focus on real-time challenges.



Participants reported that they wanted additional time and support on the following:

1. **Actionable Data:** What is it? How to use it? How can data inspire change?
2. **Promoting Systemic Change:** How to spread and sustain positive change?
3. **Distance Learning:** How to do it well?
4. **Academic Rigor for Equity:** What does it look like? Who's doing it and how?

In the coming year, Mills Teacher Scholars is well-positioned to build on established relationships and lessons learned, serving as a valuable resource to leaders and helping them take advantage of opportunities to support innovation and positive change.

## **Analysis of Feedback**

Over the 2019-2020 school year, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) worked with Mills Teacher Scholars as a learning partner, focusing on collaboration with district and school leaders in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD). After this first year of work, what are participants reporting that they value most from the Mills Teacher Scholars'-facilitated sessions? What would they like more of from Mills Teacher Scholars?

### **Theory of Change**

If Mills Teacher Scholars creates the conditions for robust, rigorous adult learning, then teachers will experience improved learning opportunities and will be able to provide improved student learning opportunities. A literature review, grounding this theory of change in relevant, recent research, is forthcoming. Note: see related Theory of Change visual and accompanying language.

### **Strategy and Implementation Overview**

Mills Teacher Scholars collaborated with leaders in two districts: Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD). In OUSD, Mills Teacher Scholars worked with a network of 16 elementary principals and 7-9 district administrators, presenting a 2-hour session as part of a longer day, over which Mills Teacher Scholars had minimal design input. In WCCUSD, Mills Teacher Scholars worked with a network of 16 secondary principals and 7+ district administrators and had input into some aspects of the full day of professional development. Mills Teacher Scholars met with the groups each month, leading roughly 2-3 hour sessions. Each meeting included personal check-ins, inquiry focused on data from principals' sites, public learning sessions, and time for individual, small and whole-group work. Both districts experienced turnover and budget crises, and starting in March both transitioned to distance learning due to COVID-19. From September through February, WCCUSD meetings were hosted by principals at schools while the OUSD network met at the Mills College campus. The difference in meeting space also led to a major difference in how the professional development was structured in WCCUSD relative to OUSD. The work in WCCUSD was centered on classroom walkthroughs, which were not possible on the Mills campus. After Shelter-In-Place, Mills Teacher Scholars continued working with WCCUSD leaders virtually, but did not in OUSD.



## **Data Sources**

PACE gathered and analyzed data from multiple sources. PACE attended and observed 4 WCCUSD meetings and 2 OUSD meetings, and analyzed both Mills Teacher Scholars' and our own notes from sessions. PACE analyzed participant feedback forms and post-meeting surveys from both districts' monthly meetings. PACE also interviewed four WCCUSD principals and one OUSD district administrator, and attended one OUSD end-of-year debrief session. With Mills Teacher Scholars' leaders, PACE debriefed monthly and conducted end-of-year interviews. Finally, PACE reviewed documents including administrator's written reflections, meeting agendas, a year-long "thinking tracker", and Mills Teacher Scholars' reports. We want to raise a caution that, given the challenges of interviewing participants during the COVID crisis, our interview sample is smaller and potentially less representative than it might have been. The majority of data PACE received was from WCCUSD; as a result, the feedback presented in this report is weighted more heavily toward principals' experience in WCCUSD, as opposed to OUSD. Additionally, our interview sample is composed solely of principals who--in spite of the challenges of leading a school during crisis--had the interest and bandwidth to be interviewed.

## **What Participants Valued Most**

### *1. Consistent Focus on Instruction*

Participants in Mills Teacher Scholars-led sessions reported that they valued having structured, monthly time to revisit goals and learn new strategies focused on instruction. While teaching and learning are at the heart of schools, principals talked about how frequently they're pulled onto the sidelines instead of being able to work with teachers to improve instruction. The Mills Teacher Scholars-facilitated learning sessions helped administrators focus on being instructional leaders in two main ways: 1) Mills Teacher Scholars "forced" principals to consistently reconnect with their big-picture vision and goals, putting instruction at the center of their inquiry, and 2) Mills Teacher Scholars introduced and guided leaders through the use of new tools, protocols and strategies that promote instructional improvement.

*Big-Picture Vision and Goals about Instruction.* Many principals reported valuing the time to reflect on and connect with bigger-picture questions, vision and goals related to instruction. In particular, principals emphasized how rare and valuable it was for them to be able to consistently revisit the same questions each month. In WCCUSD, principals explained that in the past professional development tended toward "one-offs", covering unrelated topics, and that network meetings used to consist of district administrators



running through a list of compliance requirements and deadlines, coupled with free-form, wide-ranging discussions in response to administrators asking “what do you need?” In contrast, principals welcomed Mills Teacher Scholars’ coherent focus, connecting each meeting with prior ones and keeping conversations rooted in key drivers.

In WCCUSD, principals specifically reported that they valued, “time to reflect, share, inquire, and have a thought partner,” “think time to get on the balcony (which isn’t always possible during the daily grind),” and, “the time to actually reflect on my problem of practice.” The majority of feedback on this topic came from WCCUSD participants, but some feedback came from OUSD principals as well; one reflected, “We got to step back and take a balcony view of adult learning. We looked at teachers as learners, too. The time [with Mills Teacher Scholars] was a place to think deeply.”

Participants valued having the opportunity to “walk the talk.” One said, “Being a principal and a learner has been AMAZING because we rarely have opportunities to learn in our leadership roles.” Another principal reflected on how central adult learning is to the core mission of schools, saying, “as the leader of an institution of learning, I can only expect to see growth from my teachers and staff if I grow to meet their needs.”

*Shared Strategies/Practice with Practices.* Leaders valued learning about new approaches, tools and protocols introduced by Mills Teacher Scholars. On WCCUSD’s post-meeting feedback forms, 49%, or 24 of 49 responses, cited protocols as what they valued most in sessions, saying, for example, “the protocol we used for sense-making was really useful,” and “I appreciated the protocol tools provided and also the demonstration.” One respondent wrote that the best thing about the Mills Teacher Scholars sessions was, “That it was all about instruction!! [I] love & will use the protocols we practiced.”

In each session, Mills Teacher Scholars introduced or revisited practices and protocols that prompt, guide and facilitate adult learning. Public learning sessions, in which individual principals share a problem of practice with the group, were at the heart of each meeting in both districts. In WCCUSD, the most frequently cited practice that leaders valued was classroom walkthroughs (which were not a part of the OUSD structure) combined with public learners’ discussion and inquiry before and after. Walkthroughs were perceived as authentic learning events as opposed to compliance. Other protocols specifically called out were the Four Square Protocol and the Yellow Sheet Reflection. One OUSD principal reflected, “I liked the structure of a protocol around the thinking routines, and getting some feedback. We were pushed to think in spaces where we didn’t have the answers.”

Participants also cited the value of structured conversations about mastery, grading, rigor,



and using Depth of Knowledge (DOK) levels as an improvement tool. As one participant said, “we support each other to stay focused on what matters.” Using the protocols, particularly participating in public learning sessions, connected principals to what students’ are being asked to do, and what they’re asking of their teachers. One principal wrote that participating in Mills Teacher Scholars sessions has “meant that I continuously reflect and stay focused. I’m actually living what I ask my staff to do.”

With Mills Teacher Scholars continually re-connecting participants to instructional vision and goals, as well as constantly providing opportunities to practice using practical tools, principals felt supported in their core function as instructional leaders. One principal reflected that the time with Mills Teacher Scholars has “been great because in spite of all the fast-moving pieces, I’ve been able to focus on developing something that is really important to me, for the improvement of school for my kiddos: rigor and grading. It’s allowed me to learn and grow and read and get feedback.”

## *2. Structured Collaboration with Peers*

Each Mills Teacher Scholars-facilitated session featured time for peers to collaborate with structured inquiry protocols in a variety of formats—one-on-one, small- and whole- group. Participants highly valued this time to discuss site-specific challenges and share promising and successful strategies. On WCCUSD’s post-meeting feedback forms, 55% of respondents, 27 of 49, reported highly valuing conversation with colleagues, saying they valued, “reflection time with my peers,” “collaborative discussion,” and “colleague feedback--I learn so much from my peers.” Principals valued both the social/emotional support they felt from connecting with peers, and the practical, specific tools, strategies and contacts that they were able to learn about from their peers.

Many principals cited the practical value of structured conversations in Mills Teacher Scholars-facilitated sessions. PACE observed this happening at each session attended, and principals interviewed highlighted it as well. After a meeting in WCCUSD, one wrote, “Next steps are clear for my ILT. Protocol and peer feedback always helpful.” One of WCCUSD’s district administrators reflected on this, saying, “Principals have told us that it is great to see how other principals do X. How other principals provide feedback. How other principals set up their ILT. They are able to talk about things that matter to them and latch on to something that they can actually take back to their sites.”

In post-meeting surveys and feedback forms, and in interviews, principals discussed the value of the “check-in” with partners, all struggling with the same issues, but whom they don’t always have time to see. Principals also spoke about the cathartic, stress-relieving



social/emotional value of checking in with other principals, helping them feel supported in their high-pressure roles. A strong network helps improve principal performance through reduced burnout and increased resources to focus on high-quality instruction. As one OUSD principal reflected, “It is so wonderful to have time and structure to focus on what is important to my leadership with my very wise colleagues. I love the format and I have gotten as much from listening to my colleagues as I have from their listening to me.”

Several principals said that the Mills Teacher Scholars sessions gave them space to “not have all the answers” and be vulnerable, which are essential conditions for learning. One WCCUSD district administrator explained, “When we’re in a role or have a title, we feel like we have to know it all. We tell our direct reports what they need to do... Having the space and the vulnerability to be honest with whomever you’re working with is the key.” Once leaders can acknowledge what they don’t know, it opens the door to cultivating knowledge, with the appetite and conditions for authentic, peer-based problem-solving.

### *3. Relevant, Personalized Content*

Principals described the constant flow of burning questions and challenges they face every day in their roles, and emphasized how crucial it is for professional development time away from their school sites to be grounded in practical, relevant, personalized content.

Principals need to anchor learning and problem-solving in their real, current concerns. Feedback from participants underscored the importance of this, and principals called out both ways in which Mills Teacher Scholars accomplished this well, and ways in which they could improve.

In WCCUSD, principals mentioned two things that helped keep content relevant: classroom walkthroughs and light yet structured facilitation. In walkthroughs, the principals that hosted valued having time focused on them to discuss current, real-time problems and pose a specific question to peers to consider during observations. Principal also said that they got a lot out of the post-visit feedback and discussion, saying that it provided targeted, practical, relevant advice and ideas. PACE also observed that the common experience of public learning coupled with classroom visits both focused conversation on instruction, and strengthened bonds in the group through shared vulnerability. In post-meeting feedback forms and interviews, many principals also praised the facilitation style of the Mills Teacher Scholars leader as a key driver in keeping the sessions focused on productive, practice-based inquiry. They liked that the facilitator provided structure with framing and protocols, kept them on-track and on-schedule, while also devoting 90-95% of the time to principals’ voices instead of ‘top-down’ instruction.





Relevance also came up as important (though not always a strength of the Mills Teacher Scholars work, as is described below). When it worked, participants valued being able to focus on immediate site-based concerns. One principal shared s/he valued, “the time to think through what is coming up for me at my site. I appreciate the flexibility around that time” Another wrote, “I had a feeling of respect as a professional, learner and leader. I liked that we had autonomy and choice and freedom to use the time in a way that we knew was best for us in our sites.” In both OUSD and WCCUSD, principals appreciated being able to bring their own data to meetings, though many mentioned needing more support with data-based inquiry and analysis (see forthcoming section on data).

## **Opportunities for Future Work**

### *1. Actionable Data*

It’s clear that leaders see value in asking questions based on practical, actional data, and it’s also clear that they need and want additional support in doing this. In feedback surveys, forms and interviews, principals expressed enthusiasm for the data-based work they did with Mills Teacher Scholars. One high school principal described work that grew out of the Mills Teacher Scholars sessions, writing, “sharing data with my Instructional Leadership Team is so powerful! And it prevents us from believing that I have made stuff up, etc. And it also allows us to dig deeper and uncover new thoughts to addressing these underlying issues.” Many mentioned that they got a lot out of the use of data in sessions, sharing and learning from other principals, and the practice of basing conversation and reflection on data. One principal wrote, “I love being able to share data with our partner principals because I learn so much from what they’re doing at their sites. And, it allows me time to focus on my school.” Another shared in a post-meeting feedback form, “I really liked the data activity. It illustrates gaps in what I look at vs. what I want to see in classrooms.”

Many leaders also cited data as an area in which they’d like additional support. On the WCCUSD post-meeting feedback forms, when asked what they’d like addressed in the future, data was the most popular answer. Nearly 40%, or 6 of 16 respondents, had unanswered questions about data. Grading was a common topic of concern, with principals’ questions largely focused on the lack of standardization. Others asked, “How can we use the data we are being held accountable to by the school board at these meetings as a driver for our goals?” “How can I share my data with teachers and have them not become defensive/put up a wall?”, and “What is good data? and “What data to look at?”

While questions abound, most participants expressed interest in continuing and deepening data-based inquiry work in the future. On one post-meeting feedback survey in OUSD, 80%





of leaders indicated they were “strongly interested in continuing having data-based leader inquiry time in the next academic year.”

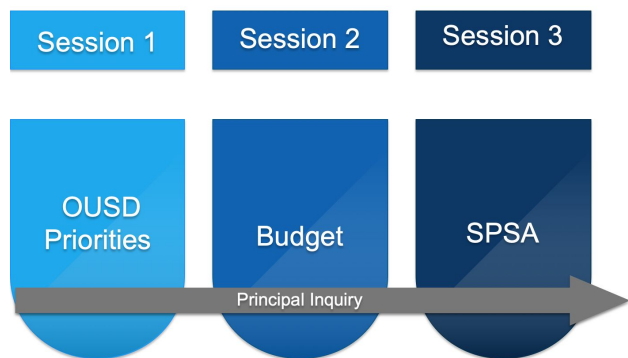
## *2. District/school connection*

Many participants had ongoing questions about the connection between school and system- or district-change. While both district and school leaders felt excited about Mills Teacher Scholars’ ambitions vision of collaborative leadership, with district and school administrators designing in partnership, that vision felt far removed from day-to-day reality, particularly in the context of leadership turnover, budget crises and the sudden transition to virtual schooling. One quarter of respondents on the WCCUSD post-meeting feedback forms said they have lingering questions about linking the work to the district. One anonymous respondent asked on a post-meeting feedback form, “How do we support adults on campus when policies in the district are not aligned?” One principal wrote they want to “make connections to policy barriers;” another cited, “the connection between the principal inquiries and district level support,” and another highlighted, “district policy and alignment of what we are being asked to do.” Another asked, “Is there a way to connect what we have been reading in our district management team meeting with the adult learning challenges we are working on?”

The work in OUSD faced a contextual challenge as well: while the year had been designed in collaboration with the network superintendent, in August that superintendent left the district. Mills Teacher Scholars had to establish a new relationship with a new leader—who functioned as both a principal and superintendent for the first month—and the transition created some tensions. Most notably, the design of each month’s professional development day was frequently not aligned with the couple of hours designed by Mills Teacher Scholars. Comments from the OUSD surveys suggest that some experienced a disconnect; as one principal wrote in a feedback survey, “the reading at the beginning didn’t feel connected to the rest of the work of the day. facilitation felt disjointed. Needed more work time to do the deliverables.” Another responded to a question about what Mills Teacher Scholars should pay attention to by saying, “what.... is really on principal's minds.” On one anonymous feedback form a third participant wrote, “I don’t feel as if we are addressing tangible, what-can-we-do things.” Additionally, while interviews from WCCUSD talked about how the classroom walkthroughs and processes around those created a through line connecting learning sessions in WCCUSD, the sessions seem more distinct in OUSD, even while individual principals tried to connect their personal inquiry across the sessions (figure 1).

Figure 1: Connections across Professional Learning Sessions in Network 2





While broader issues in how OUSD runs are definitely central to the challenges experienced in the Network 2 professional development, Mills’ ongoing success in the district will likely require new approaches to bringing coherence between Mills and the broader contexts in which participants’ work is situated. We think this is an area for Mills Teacher Scholars to reflect on deeply. The opportunity for greatest impact of this work may be in districts where norms and practices are almost antithetical to the way Mills Teacher Scholars approaches supporting educational leaders. But those situations are also the ones with the greatest potential for participant struggles to find coherence between the work with Mills Teacher Scholars and other aspects of their role and context.

### *3. Distance Learning*

Given the sudden transition to distance learning, and the continued need for it, both OUSD and WCCUSD leaders expressed the desire to focus future work with Mills on this mode of learning. One OUSD principal said, “we need to work together to create a new vision for distance learning. How do we make it happen now?” Another OUSD principal called out the heightened importance of collaboration in this context: “We’ve been operating in silos, but in some ways we’ve never as siloed as we are now. We’re all in crisis mode. There’s a great opportunity now for us to be moving forward, learning from each other and sharing. How are other schools engaging with small groups in distance learning? It’s a low lift to have others share what worked.”

The WCCUSD group met virtually 3 times after the shelter-in-place ordinance. A survey after these meetings asked principals, in the context of distance learning, what were the three most important things they needed in order to move forward? Nine responded, and the three most popular answers were: 1) Support connecting and collaborating with teachers (78%), 2) Curriculum design support (e.g. frameworks for unit and lesson planning in distance learning (67%), and 3) Opportunities to collaborate and share ideas

with other principals (56%). These answers suggest a shift in needs in response to the likelihood of continued distance learning, as traditional practices of lesson planning for in-person instruction, and typical strategies connecting and collaborating with teachers aren't available in a virtual model. What remains the same, however, is principals' needs to connect with each other. That was true pre-COVID-19, and remains true in the new context.

#### *4. Academic Rigor for Equity*

Based on interviews, feedback form responses, and observation data, principals are hungry for more conversation and practical strategies focused on equity. Many of the most heated and meaty inquiry discussions in WCCUSD meetings centered on the connection between academic rigor, Social/Emotional Learning and equity. In interviews, when asked about equity work every single principle said they wanted and needed continued conversation and support about how to lead for equity and social justice. Topics included how to provide rigor for all, AP class enrollment, how to get teachers curious about their practice and possible biases, and what it takes to create the context for higher Depth Of Knowledge levels. Particularly given access and equity issues pertaining to distance learning, this needs to be central to work moving forward.

## **Conclusion**

Leaders who participated in Mills-facilitated sessions provided a lot of positive feedback, feeling that the work helped them become better instructional leaders, as well as some constructive thoughts about how the work could be improved going forward. In particular, PACE recommends that in the year ahead Mills sessions

Keep emphasizing:

1. Focus on instruction, both re-visiting big-picture vision/goals and practicing using strategies/tools to promote improvement.
2. Relationships/collaboration for social/emotional support and practical problem solving.
3. Relevant and personalized content, so busy principals can use time away from their sites to focus on real-time challenges.

Devote additional time to:

1. Actionable data: What is it? How to use it? How can data inspire change?
2. Promoting systemic change: How do participants think this can be done? What models work in the two different district contexts?
3. Distance Learning: How to do it? How to do it well?



4. Academic Rigor for Equity: What does it look like? Who's doing it and how? How to do it at principals' specific sites?

In the coming year, the challenge of distance learning will place unprecedented strain on school leaders, students and their families. Amidst grave concerns regarding quality and equity of access, there is also an uplifting, positive truth: great disruption can create great opportunities to innovate. Those resistant to change will now have no choice but to do so. In an end-of-year reflection meeting, an OUSD principal asked, "Maybe we need to rethink school? Maybe we blow it up, take risks, and innovate new ways of doing school?" A district administrator responded, "I like your ideas about thinking about school differently. Whatever we do, there are risks involved. My hope is we can support everyone. How do we make this a safe place to take these risks?" In this unique context, Mills is well-positioned to be an invaluable resource to leaders, helping them take advantage of opportunities to support innovation and positive change.