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of the States

What's Happening in School and District Leadership?

March 2005



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Acknowledgments

This report kicks off a new leadership initiative at the Education Commission of the States (ECS) in partnership and with support from MetLife Foundation. Our goal is to provide state, district and local education leaders with ideas and approaches for infusing excellent leadership into schools toward improving student achievement.

Katy Anthes, an ECS policy analyst/program director who specializes in education leadership and governance, wrote the report. The author would like to thank several individuals who reviewed drafts of the report, and contributed useful ideas and suggestions. They include MetLife Foundation's Danielle Kolker and ECS staff members Arika Long, Cathy Walker and Suzanne Weiss.



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Introduction

An orchestra conductor must simultaneously listen to the overall melody of the music, while hearing each instrument and its contribution to the whole ensemble. She must track the cellists, violinists, percussionists and horns – hear what they are doing separately, as subgroups and as a whole, and unite them in a sweeping interpretation of a great work.

In the same way, a principal must recognize and stay focused on the overall education goals, while giving individual staff and students attention and improvement strategies that increase student achievement. How does a principal orchestrate and lead complex accountability systems, instructional practices, human resource systems, school budgets and decisionmaking structures to make an effective education system? This orchestration takes place through various leadership styles and approaches employed by principals, superintendents, teacher leaders and other administrators.

State and district policymakers should pay close attention to how these leadership strategies are developed and implemented. New research suggests that leadership styles and approaches have a significant impact on student achievement. This impact can be both direct – a principal as the instructional leader of the school – and indirect – a principal who creates an environment in which teachers feel valued, engaged and committed to their work.

New energy and resources are emerging for policy discussions about the aspects, types and styles of leadership that lead to *effective* school practices. Some of these emerging issues include standards for defining high-quality leaders, distributed leadership approaches and school leaders' influence in the creation of a school culture conducive to teaching and learning. Each of these topics will be explored in this paper, as well as provide a snapshot of the recent research and literature. Several promising examples of state and district activities also will be described.

Highly Qualified Leaders

The importance of highly qualified educators has been discussed extensively in regard to teachers, but only recently has started to focus on school and district leaders. This recent attention has led to progress in defining what a highly qualified leader is through the development and implementation of standards for education leaders. State legislative leaders will likely need to make changes in policy to ensure all schools are staffed with highly qualified *leaders* as well as teachers.

Recent Research, Literature and Ideas

Education organizations and researchers over the past several years have created multiple sets of leadership standards that provide a good starting place in defining a highly qualified leader. Most states are using these leadership standards in some form or another—though how they are used and implemented varies greatly. Currently, it is these standards that define a highly qualified leader.

One of the first sets of leadership standards was produced by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). The project was a collaborative effort of the Council of Chief State School Officers and a panel of education experts, who wrote six standards, dispositions and performances that school leaders should be able to meet. At least 35 states have used the ISLLC standards in some form or another to create licensure requirements, to develop curriculum for preparation programs or to help districts develop leadership capacity.



Leader standards also have been developed by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the Education Leaders Constituent Council (ELCC), which is connected to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) also have completed substantial research on leadership practices, and have created leadership frameworks that can be used as standards and definitions of what “highly qualified” might mean in terms of school and district leadership. Each set of standards defines a highly qualified leader slightly differently.

McREL recently published an analysis and comparison of the ISLLC standards and their own “Balanced Leadership” research¹ in a report titled *The Leadership We Need: Using Research To Strengthen the Use of Standards for Administrator Preparation and Licensure Programs (2004)*. In addition, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) has completed a “crosswalk” of these five different leadership standards (ISLLC, ELCC, NAESP, SREB and McREL) and found that all the standards generally fit within several categories:²

A highly qualified leader excels at:

- Developing and articulating a vision
- Strategic decisionmaking and implementation
- Creating a culture of learning

- Using data effectively
- Understanding curriculum and instruction
- Engaging all members of the staff
- Understanding effective management
- Providing high-quality professional growth opportunities to staff
- Communicating effectively and honestly with staff, students and community members.

New Research about Leadership

Most of the leadership standards mentioned above were created based on educators’ professional judgment and experience. Notably different is McREL’s Balanced Leadership research, which identifies 21 characteristics of leaders that have been shown to have a statistically significant effect size on student achievement (2003). The McREL research, based on an analysis of a subset of 5,000 studies, is among the first to empirically link the quality of school leadership with increased student achievement. Those effect sizes³ on student achievement range from a statistically significant correlation of .15 to .33 (McREL, 2003). Now, many states are taking a closer look at their leadership standards and preparation programs to ensure they reflect the 21 characteristics identified by McREL.

Similar studies are now under way, including the Wallace Foundation-commissioned University of Minnesota and University of Toronto study of the impact of leadership practices, approaches and policies on student learning (2004). Preliminary findings suggest the work of principals and superintendents has a powerful, albeit indirect, impact on student learning – second only, among school-related factors, to the quality of classroom instruction. And the impact tends to be greatest in schools where the learning needs of students are most acute.

¹ Waters, Tim, Robert Marzano and Brian McNulty. *Balanced Leadership: What 30 Years of Research Tells Us about the Effect of Leadership on Student Achievement*. Aurora, CO: McREL, 2003.

² Anthes, Katy. *Highlights: Leader Standards*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 2005.

³ An effect size is a way of quantifying the differences in a result (like student achievement) if a variable were changed (the type of leadership). Effect sizes are expressed as a correlation (r). Therefore, “leadership” correlates as a certain portion of “effect” on student achievement.

In a similar vein, a recent study by the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality on the working conditions of teachers found that high-quality leadership was the single greatest predictor of whether or not high schools made “adequate yearly progress” – as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act – more than either school size or teacher retention (2004).

The results of these and other studies will help organizations and states further refine their standards and definitions of what makes a highly qualified leader.

While many point to the use of well-founded leadership standards as the key to finding and developing leaders, some argue that highly structured standards and licensure requirements might serve to “screen out” highly promising nontraditional candidates for leadership positions (Hess, 2003).

In *A License to Lead*, Frederick Hess proposes a simple three-point standard for leaders. They should (1) hold a bachelor of arts or bachelor of science degree from an accredited college or university and pass a rigorous criminal background check, (2) possess the kind of experience and the sort of temperament the job requires, and (3) be able to demonstrate mastery of the technical knowledge and skills the job requires.

Hess envisions a hiring process in which the focus is on the particular abilities and characteristics a candidate would bring to the context of the school he or she would be leading. The principal would not be expected to possess the entire range of knowledge that the school organization requires, and school systems would be able to create their own performance-based criteria for hiring context-specific qualified leaders.

How Well Are We Preparing School and District Leaders?

Literature, anecdotes and surveys on how states and districts are preparing leaders to meet to become highly qualified suggests the current state of leadership preparation needs attention. The 2001 Public Agenda surveys of school leaders say that superintendents and principals give an “unenthusiastic review of formal administration preparation programs.” Moreover, 88% of superintendents in one survey said a good way to improve educational leadership is to “overhaul leadership-training programs.” Additionally, 69% of principals and 80% of superintendents feel typical leadership-preparation programs in graduate schools of education are “out of touch with realities of what it takes to run today’s schools.”

SREB’s report, *Are States Making Progress? Tapping, Preparing and Licensing School Leaders Who Can Influence Student Achievement*, found that “states and districts have made little or no progress in tapping future leaders,” and “states have adopted curriculum and instruction standards for leaders but these have not resulted in universities changing what leaders learn, how they learn it or how they work with K-12 schools” (SREB, 2002). A publication by the Institute for Education Leadership, *Preparing School Principals: A National Perspective on Policy and Program Innovations*, came to similar conclusions about the current state of preparation, while still remaining optimistic about future trends in leadership preparation – both at universities and in districts.

While much progress has been made on the articulation and implementation of leadership standards across the states, more work needs to be done to ensure these standards are truly embedded in leadership-preparation programs, then translated into leadership practice – thus creating, producing and evaluating highly qualified leaders in the schools across the nation.



Activities in States and Districts

Georgia

The curriculum of Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement is designed around a unique set of standards, drawn from a variety of sources. They include the standards developed by ISLLC, ELCC and McREL; the Georgia University System Board of Regents' "critical success factors" for leaders; and private-sector approaches such as the Baldrige model of performance management.

The institute was designed by a cross-functional group of experts from business, higher education, K-12 and educational support organizations. By combining the knowledge of these professionals and revising leadership standards, the institute came up with a comprehensive curriculum that district teams participate in as a cohort. This team approach to learning reflects the type of distributed leadership the state of Georgia is encouraging in districts and schools.

District teams (rather than only the superintendent or principal) that go through the leadership-development program helps to widen the leadership talent pool in all districts in the state. The program can be designed and crafted to fit the individual time commitments and needs of the teams that participate. For more specific information about the institute, see www.galeaders.org.

Delaware

Policymakers in Delaware recently worked with university leadership-preparation programs to rethink and revamp their curricula. This initiative is part of the Delaware State Action for Education Leadership Project (SAELP), funded by the Wallace Foundation. It all started with the state education department evaluating school leader-preparation programs of all three state universities that offer



either a master's degree, a doctorate in educational leadership or coursework for certification as a school administrator. Delaware used a "critical friends" process that included a self-assessment of existing programs based on a rubric designed around the ISLLC standards. These rubrics were evaluated, discussed and scored by a team of two consultants and two practicing Delaware school leaders. After the rubrics and reports were completed, onsite visits resulted in a discus-

sion of how university programs could be redesigned to better prepare school leaders. As a result of the review, all three universities are making substantial research-based changes to their existing programs, and bringing them into better alignment with both the ISLLC standards and Delaware Educator Accountability legislation.

Cleveland, Ohio

The First Ring Leadership Academy is a collaborative effort between Cleveland State University and the school districts surrounding the city of Cleveland to develop highly qualified leaders who understand the context and environment they are about to lead. In this one-of-a-kind collaboration, the 13 school districts, known as the First Ring, joined forces with Cleveland State University's College of Education to create a leadership academy for aspiring school principals. The First Ring Leadership Academy began with its first cohort in fall 2003. A critical shortage of qualified school principals and the need to immerse principal candidates in preparation programs aligned with the district needs and realities in Cleveland inspired the First Ring School Superintendent's Collaborative. Formed in 2000, the collaborative seeks new ways of recruiting, training and retaining exemplary school leaders. For more specific information about the First Ring Leadership Academy, see http://www.csuohio.edu/coe/Overview/academic_Departments/CASAL/firstRingLeadership.html.

Distributed Leadership

Many types of effective leadership are being discussed as potential approaches to improving school quality and student performance. One approach is termed “distributed leadership,” which means the leadership functions needed in a school are shared by multiple members of the school community. This approach is intended to foster community, ownership, engagement and more manageable workloads for overburdened school and district staff.

Recent Research, Literature and Ideas

A clear definition of distributed leadership and how it plays out in schools is necessary to understanding its usefulness in different school and district contexts. Researcher James Spillane discusses three different types of distributed leadership:

- Collaborative distribution, where “leaders work together to execute a particular leadership function and one leader’s practice becomes the basis for another leader’s practice”
- Collective distribution, when “two or more leaders who work separately but interdependently in pursuit of a shared goal involving interdependent activities that produce a common practice”
- Coordinated distribution, when “different leadership tasks are performed in a particular sequence for the execution of some leadership function.”⁴

Each of these types of distributed leadership can involve more people in leadership roles in the school system, generate new ideas and solutions, and create a strong team approach to running an organization. Distributed leadership can have the important effect of enhancing teacher engagement and involvement in decisionmaking. This is important because recent research suggests that the meaningful engagement of teachers by principals is an effective tool in school improvement and in leadership development.

In their book *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders*, authors Marilyn

Katzenmeyer and Gayle Moller define, describe and advocate for engaging teachers in leadership roles throughout the school. They argue that creating a system where teachers are leaders and decisionmakers in the school represents a significant shift – from the old norm of staff and student isolation to a shared staff vision and implementation of shared strategies.

Katzenmeyer and Moller define teacher leadership as “teachers who lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice (p. 5).” An important point they make is that currently schools are not set up to allow for meaningful distributed leadership or teacher-leadership roles. Their book discusses the challenges to this approach such as the teacher norms that do not readily allow for teachers to assume leadership roles because they are socialized to not “draw attention to themselves” as individuals. In addition, as the pressures of high-stakes accountability systems increase, leaders sometimes feel forced to take top-down approaches to managing and leading schools, where teachers are told what to do, rather than included in the decisionmaking process.

Though more researchers are focused on this topic, little is known yet about different distributed-leadership models and their impact on student achievement. The concept of distributed leadership often is pitched as the new “magic bullet” for the enormous and often times “undoable” job of the school principal. Principals are expected to master skills and knowledge that range from savvy political wrangling with communities and businesses to being instructional leaders to managing finances, curriculum, discipline and school operations. In addition, their presence is often required at basketball games, choir concerts and school board meetings.



⁴ Spillane, Jame. “Educational Leadership.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, vol. 25, no. 4 (2004): 344-345.

How is one person supposed to juggle all these demands and responsibilities? Distributed leadership is one answer. Spillane warns, however, that policymakers and district leaders should not view this approach as the solution to complex workload issues in districts and schools.⁵ The approach requires focused thought and deliberate implementation for it to be successful. That does not mean the concepts are not useful in helping districts and schools think about how they manage and lead highly complex systems of learning. Districts may want to take a look at their human-resource capacity and how they collaborate and coordinate together. This will highlight district-leadership strengths and weaknesses, and allow staff to deploy people in areas where they can provide leadership by using their talents for the greatest benefit of students.

Activities in States and Districts

Massachusetts

Massachusetts has launched a statewide initiative aimed at strengthening leadership capacity at all levels of the education system. The initiative, a part of SAELP, funded by the Wallace Foundation includes:

- Working with school districts to highlight and create new roles for teachers, and ensure they are involved in curriculum and instruction decisions at both the school and district levels
- Providing professional development to district school committees to help them realign district policies and possibly redefine the roles and responsibilities of administrators, teachers, specialists, students and community members that support distributive leadership in schools and districts
- Creating strong links between distributed leadership, succession planning and professional development.

Additional information on the Massachusetts initiative is available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/eq/csfp/>.

⁵ Spillane, James. In a presentation at the Delaware Policy and Practice Institute. Dover, DE: June 24-25, 2004.

Clovis, California

The Clovis Unified School District serves 33,418 students (60% white, 21% Latino, 12% Asian, 3.5% black, 1.3% Native American, and 1.2% Filipino) in the cities of Clovis and Northeast Fresno. The district, known for its strong commitment to distributed leadership, provides parents, community members and school staff with a number of opportunities to actively participate in decisionmaking and program evaluation. They include school-site councils, parent clubs, and School Assessment and Review Teams (SART). Each school's SART, which serves as a sort of advisory board, is made up of the principal, school staff, parents, students, community members and even citizens who do not have children at the school.

In addition, area SART committees influence policy at the district level and include representation from the superintendent's office and school SART chairpersons. The district's goal is to encourage continuous improvement of teachers and a high level of collaboration among all district shareholders. To find out more about the Clovis model, see www.clovisusd.k12.us.



School and District Culture

An important but sometimes overlooked aspect of leadership is the creation of a culture conducive to teaching and learning. The school culture has an impact on the retention rates and overall stability of the school staff and students – key factors in raising student achievement.

A discussion of school culture includes several components. First, what are the conditions of the school and district (some of which include district policies, governance structures, accountability rules and lines of authority) in which the leader must operate? Second, do those conditions help or hinder the principal from doing his or her job? Is the job, as it is structured, manageable? Finally, how does the principal *create* a culture that supports and enhances the teaching and learning process?

According to recent Public Agenda surveys, principals' greatest frustrations relate to the politics of schools and districts, inadequate funding and a lack of control over decisions vital to the schools for which they are held accountable. This frustration leads to a high turnover rate among both principals and teachers. Principals leave the profession when they are burnt out, don't feel they have enough authority or can no longer work an average of 15 hours a day. Similarly, teachers will leave the profession if they work for a leader who is unhappy, feels marginalized or does not know how to create a culture that engages and supports them and their students.

Recent Research, Literature and Ideas

While the issue of school culture is clearly crucial in terms of school stability, staff retention and student learning, there is evidence that more attention needs to be paid to this area of school improvement. Teachers and principals perceive their school cultures in very different ways, and the bottom line is teachers are less pleased with the current state of school affairs than are principals.

This gap between teacher perceptions of school culture and that of principals is documented in the recent *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: An*

Examination of School Leadership. For example, only three in 10 teachers described their principals as being good listeners, while more than half of principals rated themselves as being good listeners. Nine in 10 principals said their school has "open communication," while only six in 10 teachers and parents feel this way. And nearly all principals (97%) said they are satisfied with the relationship with their teachers, compared to only seven in 10 teachers who are satisfied with the relationship to their school principal.

These discrepancies point to underlying problems in school culture that affect the learning environment of students. One way to close this gap is to create a decisionmaking team that includes teachers in the school-leadership process.

A recent report from the Harvard Civil Rights Project titled *Listening to Teachers: Classroom Realities and No Child Left Behind* also sheds light on the importance of school culture. One of their top requests was to have school leaders capable of engaging and working effectively with teachers and parents. The teachers surveyed also said there is an urgent need for strong, stable, long-term leaders, especially in low-performing schools. This reinforces past studies that showed successful school reform takes stable leadership and a sustained focus of at least five years. This is a tall order to fill since teachers also felt there was nothing to encourage high-quality leaders to come to and stay in challenged schools.

The Harvard and MetLife reports, as well as other research on effective leadership, point to the need for leaders to create school cultures that:

- Engage teachers in meaningful ways
- Engage the community and parents in meaningful ways
- Focus and align school improvement strategies that create a culture of learning for every member of the school community – students, parents, teachers and principals.



Activities in States and Districts

Oregon

Culturally competent practices is an important aspect of school culture. State officials in Oregon noted looming changes in student demographics specifically related to their Hispanic population. To create a school culture that accommodates all learning types and needs, Oregon is providing ongoing professional learning opportunities in districts to increase skills for teachers and leaders in the area of cultural competency and equity. It is also incorporating a standards-based focus for

aspiring leaders on cultural competency and equity through preparation programs in schools and universities. The goal – as part of their State Action for Education Leadership initiative – is to provide leaders with necessary knowledge and tools to understand and deal with cultural issues in their schools that have an impact on student learning and school stability. This initiative is connected to the SAELP initiative in the state of Oregon.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina

Charlotte-Mecklenburg is a large urban school system with an enrollment of 116,853 students (43% black, 42% white, 3% American Indian, 4% Asian and 9% Hispanic). The district's vision for increasing student achievement is focused on a strategy of deeper engagement of – and communication among – teachers, parents, students and the community. The district believes this strategy will lead to excellent curriculum choices for students, a healthier learning environment, fewer discipline problems and expanded extracurricular activities for students.

The district uses a leadership-team model for each school that includes staff, parents and the principal. The parents must reflect the diversity of the school's students, both racially and socioeconomically. In addition, the district has created a Strategic

Partnerships Office that provides an up-to-date directory of district needs (called “time, talent and treasure needs”) for each school; and links volunteers, donations and other engagement opportunities across the community in a strategic, centralized, efficient manner. This office allows the district to easily deploy volunteers and donations to the most needed areas.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg uses a Balanced Score Card to monitor progress on each of the strategies mentioned above, as well as the district's five overall goals (four of which are directly tied to positive learning cultures for students and staff). The fact that the district tracks progress on engagement strategies shows a deep commitment to their efforts to truly change school cultures for the better. Additional information about the district's Balanced Score Card, the Strategic Partnerships Office and the school-leadership teams is available at www.cms.k12.nc.us.

ECS – MetLife Foundation Initiative

With the support of MetLife Foundation, ECS will conduct studies of innovative and successful leadership approaches in selected districts across the country. This research will build on the findings of the MetLife survey of teachers, principals, parents and students on the quality of school leadership in their buildings and communities.

The knowledge gained from our district-study work will be used to produce a toolkit that provides policymakers with practical ideas and strategies for improving leadership at all levels of the education system. ECS' hope is that when MetLife next conducts a survey examining these issues, the results will point to a more unified vision among all members of the school community.

For more information about the MetLife Foundation and ECS Leadership partnership, contact Katy Anthes, program director, at kanthes@ecs.org; or Arika Long, researcher, at along@ecs.org.



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