

Acknowledgments

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Table of Contents

Transparency	1
Enabling Conditions/Transparency	2
Shared Leadership	3
Enabling Conditions/Shared Leadership	4
A Focus on the Needs and Interests of Kids	4
Enabling Conditions/A Focus on the Needs and Interests of Kids	4
Policy Options and Recommendations	5
References and Resources	5

Introduction

With funding from MetLife Foundation, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) recently set out to identify and understand exemplary education leadership practices in diverse high-need school districts across the nation. From a nationwide scan, ECS selected four districts to examine: Boston (Massachusetts) Public Schools, National City (California) Public Schools, Memphis (Tennessee) City Schools and Chugach (Alaska) Public Schools.

ECS policy staff conducted on- and off-site interviews in the four districts with students, teachers, administrators and community members. Our goal was to learn how leadership at all levels of the education system works to increase student achievement, particularly for students with the greatest needs. What we found is amazing and inspiring – and, above all, doable!

This policy brief explores a key leadership strategy common to all four districts: *The purposeful cultivation of an environment that reflects – and reinforces – a commitment to:*

- Transparency
- Shared leadership
- Focusing on the needs and interests of children.

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Transparency

Creating respectful and trusting relationships is a critical element of successful school leadership.¹ In the districts we visited, such relationships form the foundation for satisfied and motivated staff and contribute to meaningful change and improvement.

The findings from our interviews suggest that a key factor in building a culture of respect and trust is transparency, which includes:

- Full, accurate and timely disclosure of information – within and across schools, as well as externally (the mayor’s office, the school board, the teachers’ union and community organizations)
- Open and honest discussions about expectations, goals and strategies – including allowing “challenges” and alternative viewpoints to be heard and considered without fear of reprisal
- Organizational practices that encourage and provide opportunities for people at all levels to share information, decisions and responsibility, to be open to and comfortable with reflecting on both individual and collective performance, and to talk openly about what is working and what is not.

A good example of transparency in the districts we studied is the strategic planning process in Chugach School District (CSD) in rural south-central Alaska.

Over the past decade, Chugach students – half of whom are Alaska Natives – have made remarkable gains on state and national achievement tests. In 1994, the average Chugach student was three years below grade level in reading, and lagging badly in other areas. Now these students have moved from the 28th percentile nationally in reading to the 71st percentile; from the 53rd percentile in math to the 78th; and from the 22nd percentile in spelling to the 65th. When state proficiency exams began in 2000, Chugach students topped the Alaska average by 8% in reading, 17% in math and 35% in writing.

With only 30 faculty and staff, CSD is the smallest organization to ever win a Baldrige Award for improved performance and quality. CSD delivers instruction in education from preschool to age 21 in a comprehensive, standards-based system. Education takes place 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Instruction is delivered in the workplace, in the community, in the home and in school.

CSD has pioneered a standards-based system of “whole child education” that emphasizes real-life learning situations. After securing a waiver from the Alaska Department of Education, the district replaced credit hours and grade levels with an individualized, student-centered approach. This method aims for measurable – and demonstrable – proficiency in 10 areas of performance, from basic academic and career development skills to cultural awareness and character skills. CSD’s high school graduation requirements exceed Alaska’s requirements in many ways.

According to the superintendent, the key to such success was engaging the entire Chugach community – the parents and other villagers, local businesses and the students themselves – in structured discussions to identify their needs and goals. The whole system was then redesigned to achieve those results.

Regularly scheduled town meetings, business partner meetings and school meetings were held to garner input about the community’s common values, beliefs and goals for its school system and students. Goals were prioritized and action plans developed and implemented in order to achieve these goals. Using input from the schools, communities and businesses, CSD developed performance standards for 10 content areas.

As a result, the entire community experienced and gained deep ownership of their schools by seeing their ideas, values, beliefs and goals reflected in the system. The superintendent noted that “shared vision and real community engagement is a constant part of your job – you are never done with it.”



Enabling Conditions/ Transparency

Shared vision. What do you want kids to know – and why? The answers to these questions need to be decided by: school staff, administrators, parents, students, community members, business leaders and other partners. If a vision is to be shared, it must result from a process that actively involves all stakeholders. Further, once a shared vision has been successfully determined, it needs to be periodically revised or reaffirmed to take into account changes in staff and/or school climate, progress made in various areas and so on.

Clarity and consistency of the superintendent's and other leaders' values, beliefs, goals, actions and expectations. In the districts we visited, key objectives and expectations were posted everywhere. Organizational charts and communication channels were clear and consistent. Leaders made a point to ask questions of everyone, including teachers and principals. One superintendent walks around with a notebook and constantly asks questions of other district

personnel. "By doing this we model the behavior of openness and trust," the superintendent said. "We know the good, the bad and the ugly." And because all staff, including teachers, are used to superintendents, resource people and principals being in their classrooms, they feel the culture of open reflection on their practice is a normal part of their job. "Being observed is not a 'gotcha' tool, it is an improvement tool," the superintendent said.

District governance structure. In every district we visited, the organizational structure supported communication up, down and across in the system. In Boston, for example, the governance structure includes superintendent triads, principal-cluster leaders, assistant superintendents for each triad, principal leadership teams and a superintendent's leadership team. This structure helps keep the communication lines open in a large district. Another important element of the district governance structure was the meaningful involvement of the teachers' union and school board. Regardless of agreement, agenda or strategy, leaders made it a priority to keep them not only constantly informed but also actively involved.



Shared Leadership

Building leadership capacity is an essential element of efforts to bring about fundamental, lasting change and improvement. There have to be more leaders in a school district than the superintendent, and the principal is not the only leader in a healthy school.

In the districts we visited, superintendents and principals did more than just know these truths – they codified them in practice and actively worked to create an environment of distributed, or shared, leadership within their systems. By shared leadership, we mean:

- Developing and empowering everyone to do their jobs well
- Creating career opportunities within current roles
- Creating opportunities for career advancement
- Creating opportunities to be involved in district and school leadership teams and feedback groups
- Creating and supporting real decision-making authority
- Rewarding positive contributions to productive change.

Instructional leadership teams that work with and advise the principal were vital in the schools we visited. In addition, superintendents had leadership teams composed of principals, teachers and counselors as well as other staff. In all instances, it was clear that the participants on these teams had real decisionmaking power and their advice was valued.

These districts also were working with community partners to broaden the concept of the “district” and who has a leadership responsibility and stake in it. Such partnerships help strengthen the position and ability of the schools to achieve goals and garner additional resources and services. We also observed district staff being given extra leadership and authority for budgets, and principals being allowed to try out new ideas and approaches. Districts often give this flexibility to principals as long as lessons learned are shared districtwide (even if the idea fails to achieve the intended results).

Further, everywhere we visited, teachers and staff said they had access to professional development opportunities directly linked to both their needs and those of students. This allowed them to feel more prepared for and more comfortable with taking on leadership roles within the school and district.

Overall, we learned there is no one right way to foster shared leadership. We did see a healthy tension between “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches. Clearly, some decisions have to be top-down – and in such cases, the districts we studied made an effort to give people (1) an opportunity to provide feedback, (2) a solid explanation of how decisions are aligned with the goals of the district and (3) the right support to implement them. Oftentimes, at the school level, decisionmaking was very much bottom-up, with issues brought to the attention of the school leadership team, discussed and resolved.

“Building leadership capacity is an essential element of efforts to bring about fundamental, lasting change and improvement.”

Enabling Conditions/ Shared Leadership

Clear expectations. In every district we visited, teachers, principals and staff clearly understand their roles, what is expected of them, and how they can contribute to helping the school and district succeed.

Use of time. The districts we visited structure their school days to allow for common planning time both within and across schools.

Opportunities for growth and advancement. The four districts we examined are focused on

building capacity through professional development opportunities. The leaders in the system encourage their staff to take on leadership positions. Several superintendents said they considered it part of their job to (1) continuously conduct “inventories” at all levels of the system to identify new or potential leaders and (2) place these people into jobs that could accelerate their learning and, thus, the growth of the district. In addition, all of the districts we studied have new-principal support systems and a career ladder for individuals who want to explore the principalship. These districts see the preparation and development of capable principals as the linchpin of their improvement efforts.

A Focus on the Needs and Interests of Children

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In the districts we studied, policies and practices reflected a strong, unwavering commitment – on the part of every adult, in every building – to the belief that kids matter most.

As we talked with the principal of a pilot high school in Boston, for example, all of the students who popped in and out of her office was greeted by name, and she fielded requests ranging from a bottle of water to setting up a meeting to discuss a student portfolio. The principal talked about her vision that every one of her students would be prepared to go to college. To drive home her point, she took us into the hallway to a bulletin board where every senior in the school had posted his or her postsecondary plans.

In Boston, the district’s strategic staff accountability plan spells out how everyone from the superintendent all the way to the cafeteria worker can – and is expected to – contribute to increased student achievement. “Everyone in the district is going in the right direction,” one person told us. “Now they may be at different levels, but they are either running in that direction, walking toward it or facing it.

Enabling Conditions/ A Focus on the Needs and Interests of Kids

Clarity, stability and alignment of mission, goals, policies and practices. At the core of this condition is an explicit understanding that all decisions are made on the basis of one primary criterion: Is this good for the children in our district and school?

Commitment to valuing staff. Leaders in the districts we visited make sure they create an environment in which staff feel valued, trusted and confident.

“Walking the talk.” Many of the school and district leaders we interviewed see themselves as responsible for advocating – visibly and vocally – on behalf of children. “I am more for kids than adults and that gets me into trouble sometimes, but it’s what I have to do,” said one principal in Boston. Another principal, in Memphis, said emphatically that when he is forced to make the choice between teachers and kids, he will choose kids every time.



Policy Options and Recommendations

- State policies governing *preparation programs for superintendents and principals* should reflect the importance of equipping school leaders with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to create productive learning cultures.
- The *evaluation of school principals* should take into account their performance and progress in terms of creating a positive learning culture. Elements of school culture can be tracked through student and staff surveys and qualitative information.
- *District vision, mission statement and policies* should both embody and reinforce a commitment to creating a culture of learning, trust, transparency and a focus on children.
- The *school board's policy focus and direction* should be the same as or completely aligned with the superintendent's. The school board should hold the superintendent accountable for his or her progress toward creating and sustaining a healthy school-community learning culture.
- In *state and local policy deliberations*, explicit attention should be paid to how the policy will affect children. Though it sounds like common sense in an enterprise such as public education, too often decisions are made more for the benefit of adults in the system than for children.

References and Resources

Leading Schools: Distinguishing the Essential from the Important

This Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) issue brief is intended to assist principals in prioritizing the demands of the job by helping them identify and focus on responsibilities and practices correlated with improved student achievement. It includes findings from a factor analysis McREL conducted of the 21 leadership responsibilities identified in its report *Balanced Leadership*. One key finding is that the "order" or "magnitude" of change under way in a school affects how teachers perceive their leaders' performance. (Tim Waters and Sally Grubb, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2004)

http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/LeadershipOrganizationDevelopment/4005IR_LeadingSchools.pdf

How Leadership Influences Student Learning

According to this report from the University of Minnesota, leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors that have an impact on student learning. The authors conclude that leadership's influence tends to be greatest in schools where the learning needs are most acute. Leaders can make a difference by setting directions, developing people – providing teachers and others with the necessary support and training to succeed – and by ensuring that the entire range of conditions and incentives in districts and schools fully supports teaching and learning. (Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota; Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2004)

<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/EducationLeadership/HowLeadershipInfluencesStudentLearning.htm>

(Readers interested in a complete listing of Wallace Foundation-funded reports may wish to visit the Knowledge Center at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/>)

Re-Inventing Schools Coalition

The Re-Inventing Schools Coalition is a nonprofit organization that works with rural school districts to implement the Quality School Model. The coalition seeds prototypes, funds research and development, supports leadership academies and publicly recognizes strong models.

<http://reinventionschools.org/>

¹ See, Kenneth A. Leithwood and Carolyn Riel, *What We Know About Successful School Leadership* (Philadelphia, PA: Laboratory for Student Success, Temple University, 2003); and Tim Waters, Robert J. Marzano and Brian McNulty, *Balanced Leadership: What 30 Years of Research Tells Us about the Effect of Leadership on Student Achievement* (Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2004).



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