

Building Leadership Capacity in Smart Education Systems

Deborah K. King and
Margaret Balch-Gonzalez

A new approach to leadership is needed to ensure that school systems equitably and effectively prepare all their community's young people to succeed.

Our cultural landscape is filled with images of the individual hero battling against the diabolical forces of evil or the dead weight of ineptitude. In public policy, as in film and television, the solution to large and complex problems is often portrayed as finding the right hero to sweep in and save the day.

Education reform has its own versions of this heroic narrative: leaders such as the new superintendent who inherits a slew of challenges from the previous administration, the mayor who takes over a struggling school district, or the outside expert who brings in a new reform model are sometimes seen as lone superstars who fix a problem without help – or with active resistance – from the community and other stakeholders in their districts.

But more and more education leaders are finding that a different approach to leadership yields better results and greater equity. These leaders see their role less as superheroes and gatekeepers and more as partners and conveners of the many sectors that must work together to meet the challenges of eliminating systemic inequities and preparing their community's

young people to succeed in the twenty-first-century postsecondary world.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform supports this view. Through our work in urban districts around the country over the last decade, we have come to see leadership as collective, rather than individual, and as embedded in local context, practice, and relationships, rather than embodied in a particular reform model, leadership style, or individual action. This concept of leadership has also been informed by evolving bodies of work by scholars such as James Spillane (2009, 2006) in his seminal work on distributed leadership and a “leader-plus” approach. Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2009) have gone further to consider distributed leadership an essential element of sustainable leadership, which focuses on building capacity and leadership succession as part of a “dynamic and integrated strategy for change” (p. 97).

Leadership in Smart Education Systems

Our work with districts and their partners is consistent with Hargreaves and Shirley's view. Shared leadership is not simply a nice extra – it's an essential foundation for sustainable,

Deborah K. King is associate director of organizational and leadership development and Margaret Balch-Gonzalez is staff editor and a research analyst at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

equitable improvements to school systems at scale. It's not enough to bring together a diverse group of people around a table to talk, or for charismatic leaders to bring together small teams to create pockets of excellence within a struggling, dismally performing district. Shared leadership must take place within large-scale, high-functioning, cross-sector partnerships across an entire district and community that support young people's learning and development in a broad range of outcomes, both inside and outside of school – especially in historically underserved communities.

We call such a network of partnerships a *smart education system* (Simmons 2007, 2009). Each sector of the community – educators, administrators, parents, youth, community organizations, elected officials, funders, universities, unions, businesses, and civic organizations, among others – has a role to play in this network and assets to contribute, and each sector must develop the capacity to constructively participate and to hold itself accountable for results. The goal is to improve student results through two major strategies:

- ensuring that learning opportunities and supports both inside and outside of schools are equitable, comprehensive, and aligned;
- using evidence as a basis for transparent decision making and mutual accountability among partners.

These strategies require all shareholder groups to invest substantial time and effort in building relationships, leadership skills, and the capacity to work together. In this article we will look at

some of the school communities around the country who are doing this hard work and the implications for district leadership. The outcomes are encouraging, and many of the lessons learned can be applied to other communities.

What a Community Can Bring to the Table

The voices most often left out of the debates around education policy belong to the very people who are most affected: the parents, young people, and other residents of low-income, high-minority communities with struggling schools. When these groups are not included in the discussion, it's easy for other shareholders to assume that academic failure is due to a lack of interest, intellectual capacity, or morals on the part of students, families, and communities. These assumptions, or simply a lack of knowledge of community needs, sometimes lead policy-makers to design solutions that do little to address the problems – or that abandon the attempt to improve the district at scale altogether and concentrate on fostering excellence for a limited number of students.¹

But our work has also shown that many parent, community, and youth groups have built the capacity to develop leaders, gather and interpret data, present evidence to policy-makers, design solutions, form alliances around common interests, attract resources, gain meaningful participation in decision making, and apply pressure when necessary – and that when this happens, they have become effective and powerful partners in school reform.

This view of the community as bringing independent assets to the

¹ See Simmons 2009 for an analysis of the lack of inclusion of community voices and equity concerns in federal policy.

table rather than needing intervention for its deficiencies was amply supported by a recent six-year study that examined the influence of community and youth organizing for education reform in seven urban communities.² District administrators and city officials in all the sites gave ample credit to parent and youth organizing groups for calling attention to serious problems and coming up with innovative solutions that brought concrete improvements to the school system.

- In Oakland, an initiative by an organized community transformed the district by converting *all* high schools to small schools, resulting in a significant increase in student achievement. The study found that the community organization “received unequivocal credit from district administrators, teachers, and other key stakeholders for its role in winning the small schools policy” (Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009b, p. 1).
- In South Los Angeles, youth leaders gathered data showing vast disparities in course offerings across Los Angeles; curricula in their community’s high schools prepared them for low-wage jobs, not college. A youth-led campaign to apply a rigorous curriculum more equitably convinced the Los Angeles school board to mandate a college preparatory curriculum in all Los Angeles high schools. The school board president called the mandate “one of the most significant reforms this district is embarking on in the last twenty years” (Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009a, p. 19).

² For more information about the study and to download the case studies, see <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott.php>.

Strategies for Building District Leadership Capacity

Building leadership capacity for smart systems in the ways posited by this article – to work collaboratively with community groups and key partners – requires a fundamental shift in district culture, posing one of the most difficult challenges to change. Jesse Register, former superintendent of Hamilton County (Tennessee) Schools, and Joanne Thompson of the Annenberg Institute (2007) note:

It is crucial that district leaders put aside old behaviors and attitudes. . . . Too often, as districts engage in partnerships with community-based organizations, there is a mindset that the district must be in control. While district control is appropriate in some respects, district leaders need to understand that engaging partners as equals has much greater potential for success. (p. 22)

We have found that district leaders in communities with strong cross-sector and community partnerships have developed a set of skills and dispositions that foster collaboration

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with partners: being open to input and critique, respecting cultural differences among constituencies, sharing their own struggles and collaborating on developing solutions, dedicating time and public space for open and honest dialogue, shifting their view of accountability from the district being the sole accountable entity to sharing accountability among partners, and using data to inform decisions.

Confronting Beliefs and Challenging Assumptions about Class and Culture

Cultural differences are one of the biggest challenges to collaboration. To confront one's own beliefs about race, class, and culture is a difficult but necessary task, as decisions and actions flow from values and beliefs. The predominant White, middle-class culture in schooling is often an invis-

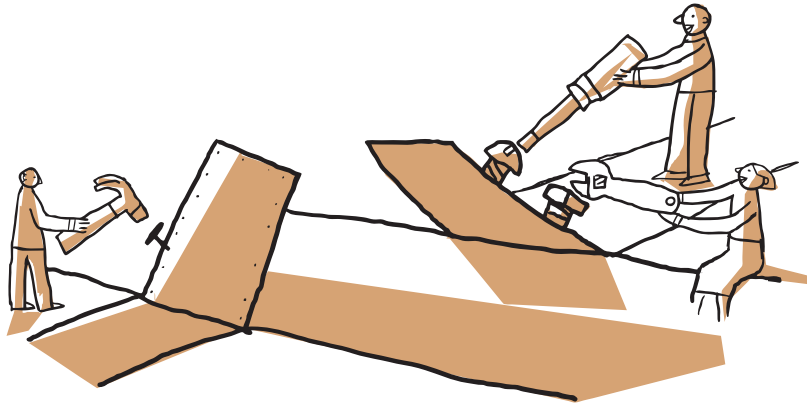
ible and unacknowledged influence on decisions about what opportunities are made available to low-income and minority children. James Scheurich and Linda Skrla (2003) describe the characteristics of leaders who help create high-achieving, equitable classrooms, schools, and districts: they are willing to confront those who do not believe that all children can succeed if given access to opportunity and the inequitable decisions based on that belief; and they are relentless in insisting on keeping excellence and equity in the forefront.

This type of leadership calls for leaders to challenge their own and others' assumptions, such as the notion that parents of color and low-income parents lack interest in and/or understanding about their child's education or lack the skills to prepare them for school. Different cultures and ways of life can provide a foundation to build education experiences that encourage group learning – and collective work and responsibility – over individual work and that create opportunities for parents and community members to actively contribute.

Routinely Using Evidence to Examine and Address Systemic Disparities

The process of confronting beliefs and assumptions, along with the massive amounts of data that schools and districts must collect to meet increased accountability demands, can unearth some uncomfortable realities. Disaggregated performance data generated by the requirements of No Child Left Behind leave little doubt that traditional public systems do a far better job of meeting the needs of White, middle-class children than the needs of poor and minority children. Scheurich and Skrla (2003) note that inequities are

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built systematically into the processes and procedures of school systems and have become part of the norms for public education.

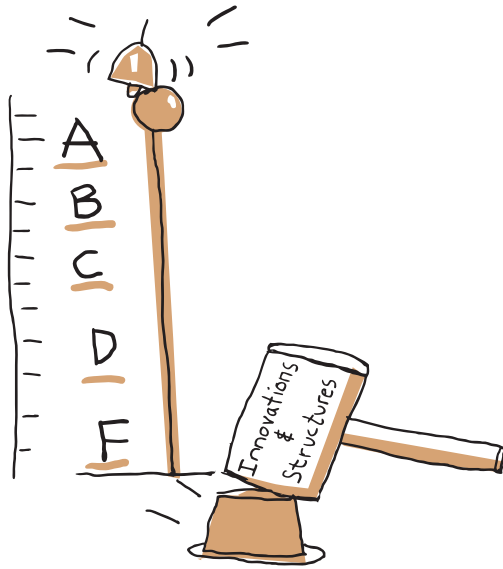
Our work with districts and their partners has shown that knowing how to gather and, most important, how to *use* evidence – qualitative and quantitative data and research on proven best practices – is a fundamental capacity that leaders in all stakeholder groups need to develop. Using evidence as a basis for discussion and decision making allows different stakeholders to find common ground, develop workable solutions, and keep the discussion from degenerating into a shouting match between opposing opinions or ideologies. Data can help identify patterns that hinder or prevent all student groups from being equally successful and suggest solutions that create new patterns of equity.

For example, the Annenberg Institute's Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE), completed in a number of urban districts around the country, is a complementary set of processes and tools designed

to build the capacity of multiple education stakeholders to collaborate on developing evidence-based practice.³ Superintendents, school board members, central office staff and administrators, teachers, principals, students, and community partners form a site team that works together to identify a key issue, gather data about related central office policies and practices, and develop a plan based on the findings. The development of leadership beyond formal district hierarchies builds the sense of ownership and shared accountability for outcomes on the part of a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

Documentation is an important aspect of using data to sustain a reform. Districts' attempts to implement changes in practice are often marred by the lack of institutional memory or documented accounts of the successes and challenges of districts' prior reform efforts. Organizational survival and leadership capacity is increased as breakthroughs and best practices are captured and shared within and across

³ For more information on CORRE and downloadable versions of reports on findings from different sites, see <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/CORRE.php>.



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stakeholder groups. Documenting evidence of how a particular reform effort or change in instructional practice led to improved learning and outcomes for adults and students is key.

In Boston, for instance, the Aspen Institute and the Annenberg Institute (2006) conducted a study at the request of superintendent Thomas Payzant as he approached retirement to document what the district’s ten-year focus on instructional improvement accomplished and what was left to do. The report aimed to provide a useful document of the reform for the new district leadership, to help sustain the reform, and for other districts facing the challenges of a transition in leadership.

Broadening Measures of Student Outcomes

The current national focus on standards and accountability calls for schools and districts to show evidence of the impact of innovations and structures on student achievement. But measurable outcomes resulting from the capacity-building and cross-sector partnership work described in this article take longer and are more difficult to capture, analyze, and share with a public that sees standardized-test scores as the primary measure of progress. In response, schools and districts are beginning to develop strategies for collecting data (qualitative and quantitative) and documenting how working collaboratively leads to improvements in individual and collective practice.

One important, and often missing, piece of the puzzle is “leading indicators” that show early signs of progress in education – as they are used in economics – rather than lagging indicators, like test scores, that are gathered too

late to help students and schools who have already failed.

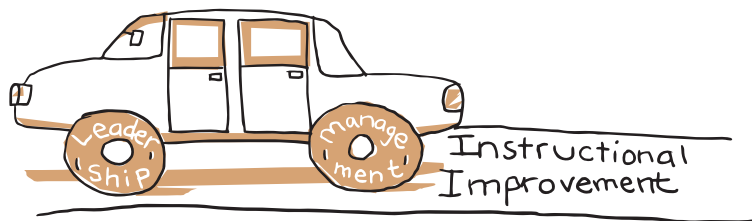
- Ellen Foley and colleagues (2008) identified eight leading indicators that district leaders and other stakeholders have used in four communities to make informed decisions about student learning. For instance, early reading proficiency, the most common indicator, was used by the study districts to provide interventions both at the student level (tutoring and extra reading instruction to individual students not reaching the benchmark) and at the system level (investment in early childhood education to increase the numbers of students meeting the benchmark).
- John Garvey (2009) argues that among other obstacles to college access for New York City's students, Regents exams and SATs are often poor indicators of student readiness for college. One of his recommendations is an index for college readiness that would reveal problems before students arrive at college and discover they must do extensive remedial work.
- Carol Ascher and Cindy Maguire (2007) describe how some high schools in New York City were able to "beat the odds" – greatly increasing college access for students with the same demographics as other schools with high dropout rates and low college-going rates. The study found that effective and creative use of data, including tracking credit accumulation, GPAs, GED scores, and college application rates, was one major strategy used by these schools.

Cultivating Collaborative Cross-Sector Partnerships

District leaders who invest in developing partnerships, take advantage of the assets and expertise each group brings, are willing to share leadership, and are sensitive to the culture of each group find a much richer set of resources available to support educational improvement and an increased sense of ownership among the community and other partners. Ultimately, this will lead to a more sustainable reform.

Ogawa and Bossert (2000) note that because stakeholders have individual resources, regardless of their formal positions and roles, all can potentially lead and use their resources to exert influence in their respective domains. Community assets, for instance, cannot be measured only in dollars and cents – they can be viewed as dollars and "sense": local intelligence about what's important to the students and families. In the Bronx, for example, community organizers and the district's facilities director worked together to locate vacant buildings that could be used to relieve severe overcrowding. The organizers had the deep knowledge of the community that enabled them to suggest spaces, and the facilities director used his specialized knowledge to evaluate which were viable sites (Mediratta, McAlister & Shah 2009).

Register and Thompson (2007) describe the importance of cross-sector partnerships in two major reform initiatives in Hamilton County that were designed to eliminate the achievement gap in its high-poverty schools and achieve systemic high school reform. Register and Thompson attribute the success of these reforms to the care with which multiple partnerships were developed and sustained. These partnerships included district and school



administrators, local and national funders, city and county elected officials, local business and community leaders, the teachers union, higher education, parents, and students. Register and Thompson note that the leadership team, consisting of the superintendent and a few other individuals from the district and from the local education fund

did not make all the decisions, and, in fact, one of the strengths of the reform effort was that many teachers and parents were involved over time in the planning and implementation of high school reform. Schools were given flexibility; outside partners were involved at the district and the school levels, and business and higher-education organizations were involved in key decisions. The level of ownership in the reform effort was extensive, and the superintendent stayed closely involved in the work through the leadership team. (p. 24)

An important contribution the district made in these partnerships, because of its unique perspective, was to be the partner that keeps the big picture in mind. Other partners were more narrowly focused on single issues, which was often helpful in areas the district could not address by itself. But the success of the first set of schools in Hamilton County created pressure to provide the same opportunities across

the district; Register and Thompson note that the district is the only partner likely to feel the pressure to scale up. The district, therefore, is in a unique position to champion equity by insisting that reforms be systemic and not merely create pockets of excellence.

Another example of a cross-sector partnership for systemic reform is led by Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, where the district has recently begun the three-year major reform project MNPS Achieves. Eight Transformational Leadership Groups, comprising more than 100 administrators, teachers, community members, and parents with relevant knowledge or expertise, will examine critical areas in need of improvement that affect the quality of instruction and learning. The project is designed to build the capacity of participants, distribute leadership, and empower them to make decisions.⁴

Ensuring the Sustainability of Leadership Practices That Increase Equity

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of building leadership capacity is to sustain this strong, shared leadership over the long term, through leadership transitions, budget pressures, and political swings. The strategies described in this article are long-term strategies

⁴ For more information, see <www.mnps.org/Page4.aspx>.

designed to build political will and formal structures to act on what the data show, create a “web” of leadership that goes beyond one individual and will survive the departure of that individual, and build multiple back-up mechanisms into the system.

To build political will, Scheurich and Skrla (2003) encourage leaders to sustain themselves by building broad alliances and networks, use every interaction to share the message of equity, create a climate where others are comfortable exchanging differing ideas and opinions, and build trust by honoring commitments made to others (pp. 104–108).

Building formal structures is important because communities can easily be overwhelmed by the number and depth of problems that surface when examining and addressing systemic inequities. A key leadership function is to shepherd the follow-up process to ensure that the emergent issues are addressed, working collaboratively to develop mechanisms, priorities, practical steps, and support needed to follow through on recommendations and document and share progress along the way. Scheurich and Skrla (2003) citing a 2000 report by Skrla and colleagues, note that

districts with cultures where student failure to learn was deemed unacceptable created multiple overlapping processes to ensure that all students learn. Like power plants, multiple systems are built in to perform the same functions in case the primary system or the first backup system fails. (p. 112)

Working Together to Improve Results for All Students

Leadership as described in this article is a practice, not a person. And the practice of leadership means organizing the roles, relationships, resources, and responsibilities of various groups of individuals with a stake in the outcome of producing well-educated, informed citizens and participants in the workforce. This kind of leadership development goes beyond traditional workshops, seminars, and conferences designed to build yet another group of individual superheroes. Along with fundamental skills in facilitation, consensus building, inquiry processes, and conflict resolution, stakeholder groups need opportunities to learn together in ways that build on their strengths, offset their weaknesses, and defuse cultural tensions.

In school communities that have made the effort to develop leaders with the capacity to participate constructively in cross-sector partnerships, the results can be remarkable. District

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administrators and policy-makers rely on a well-organized, articulate, well-informed, independent, and powerful community as an asset to a district, not an enemy. Community and parent leaders present strong evidence in an effective way with a united front and are able to find common ground and develop solutions with powerful institutions like teachers unions and school and district administrations, even in cases where those groups are former adversaries. Youth leaders prove themselves to be an invaluable asset in pinpointing the actual conditions and problems in schools and proposing solutions that adult policy-makers might not have thought of.

The results of cross-sector leadership development have been clear and well documented: better policies; safer schools; more equitably allocated supports, learning opportunities, and resources; greater public will to support schools; and improved student achievement.

The results of this kind of cross-sector leadership development have been clear and well documented: better policies; safer schools whose culture and conditions are more conducive to learning; more equitably allocated supports, learning opportunities, and resources; higher-quality teachers with better professional development; greater public will to support schools; and improved student achievement (McAlister, Mediratta

& Shah 2009; Mediratta, McAlister & Shah 2009; Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009; Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009a, 2009b).

The Real Heroes

It is often observed that our nation's ability to compete in a knowledge-based, global economy depends on a skilled and educated workforce. But the urgency of developing a new kind of leadership for educational excellence and equity does not end there. Even more important are basic principles of justice and democratic ideals. With thoughtful leadership development and structural supports for ongoing dialogue and collaboration, low-income communities, young people, district and union leadership, and other education stakeholders can work together to address many of the thorniest problems of urban education reform. No one needs to be left out of the discussion because of lack of capacity.

More and more education stakeholders are letting go of the traditional American fairy tales about leadership. They are not looking for – or trying to be – the knight in shining armor or the handsome prince who will defeat the evil enemy and save us. The true heroes of education reform in the twenty-first century are those forward-thinking leaders – from school districts, parent, student, and community groups, mayors' or governors' offices, teachers unions, philanthropic organizations, universities, or the myriad other groups that are an indispensable part of an education community – who share a commitment to equity and understand that we are all in this together.

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