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WHAT STATES AND DISTRICTS CAN DO – *TOGETHER* – TO IMPROVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Buttressed by strong evidence that quality leadership is a virtual necessity for turning around troubled schools,[1] states and districts around the country have been paying more attention in recent years to the need for better school leadership. Many have adopted a range of new policies and practices aimed at dramatically improving the preparation of principals and the conditions they confront each day. A key lesson – and a promising new approach – have emerged from these collective efforts.

The lesson is that states and districts each have essential roles to play in developing and supporting school leadership capable of lifting the educational fortunes of all children. But policies and practices at different levels of the system are unlikely to bring about effective, lasting changes in the training and conditions of leadership unless they are well coordinated. And policy coordination is far from the historic norm in any sphere of public education.

As an antidote to this frequent fragmentation of policies, a number of states and districts have been working with support from The Wallace Foundation to develop what's called a "cohesive leadership system." The idea is that the key policies and practices that affect the success of school leaders – the standards that define quality leadership and provide a basis for holding leaders accountable; the training that prepares leaders for their role as catalysts for learning; and the range of conditions and incentives that help or hinder those leaders – are most likely to be successful and sustained if they are both well-coordinated and aligned to the goal of improved student learning at all levels of public education: state, district and school.[2]

COHESIVE LEADERSHIP SYSTEMS: WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

A new report by the RAND Corporation, *Improving School Leadership: The Promise of Cohesive Leadership Systems*, analyzes the efforts of ten states, and 17 districts within them, that have worked with varying

SUMMARY

States and districts have recently taken a range of steps to better prepare and support principals capable of turning around failing schools. A new RAND report examines efforts by ten states and 17 districts funded by The Wallace Foundation to develop "cohesive leadership systems" whose goal is to create well-aligned state-district policies to ensure that principals have the training and conditions they need to improve teaching and learning in their schools. Among the findings: achieving and sustaining such state-district policy cohesion is difficult. But where progress has been greatest, principals say they feel better able to devote more time to improving instruction and more empowered to control resources.

degrees of success over the last decade to develop cohesive leadership systems. Based on the early evidence from those Wallace-supported states and districts, the report describes the key characteristics of a cohesive leadership system, the strategies most important to building and sustaining such a system, the factors that enable or inhibit its development (*see text box, p. 2*), and its benefits for principals and the schools and children they serve.

What are the distinguishing hallmarks of a cohesive leadership system? The report identifies five key dimensions:

- Comprehensiveness in the scope of state and district initiatives – for example, in addressing

standards, licensure, training, evaluation and improving conditions;
- Alignment of policies and practices within and between different levels of the system;
- Engagement of relevant stakeholders in planning and implementing policy changes;
- Agreement on the importance of leadership, what it should consist of, and how to improve it; and
- Coordination that promotes alignment, engagement and agreement around leadership improvement initiatives among the key players at all levels of the system.

Using those five dimensions, the RAND report offers a detailed snapshot of the progress made by the states and districts it studied. From that analysis, the authors identify Iowa, Delaware and Kentucky as having made the most progress to date in developing cohesive leadership systems. Delaware, for example, has taken a highly comprehensive approach that includes new leadership standards, revised licensure and certification systems for school leaders, a new leader mentoring program, a revised leader appraisal system and an expanded leader internship program.

The report stops short of validating the entire cohesive leadership system hypothesis. The evidence gathered by RAND also isn't conclusive about whether establishing such a system will actually result in better school leadership and student outcomes. In addition, the authors caution that establishing state-district policy cohesion is not an unqualified good: "Just because a set of policies is coherent does not mean that the policies are the appropriate solution to a problem."

The report's evidence *does* lend important support to the cohesive leadership system hypothesis by finding that where state and district polices are closely aligned, school principals tend to report that they have many of the conditions they need to allow them to perform effectively as leaders of learning. Specifically, principals in states and districts that have made the most progress toward cohesive leadership systems report more authority over hiring teachers, determining school schedules and defining student achievement goals than principals in places with less policy cohesion. Crucially, they also report that they are able to devote more of their time on average to the improvement of classroom instruction. Most are also satisfied with the timeliness and relevance of the data they get from their states and districts to help them make good use of their instructional time.

FACTORS THAT ENABLE OR HINDER COHESION

RAND researchers identified a range of factors that enabled or hindered strategies to build cohesive leadership systems in the states and districts they studied:

Enabling factors:
- Common structures and policies – for example, common academic standards and assessments for students and common graduation requirements;
- History of collaboration – among state agencies and among states and districts;
- Strong pre-existing social networks – having the same people serving in different roles over time;
- Participation of non-traditional actors other than state agencies – such as professional associations, universities, "lead learner" districts;
- Political support – from top state and district leaders; and
- Supportive, stable and aligned superintendents and school boards – to ensure an agreed-upon vision for improving school leadership.

Inhibiting factors:
- Limited resources;
- Limited state education agency capacity – in terms of both the number of staff and their knowledge and capacity to lead the work;
- Key staff turnover;
- Too many organizations, too far apart – making logistics for working groups hard to manage;
- Culture of independence – history of strong local independence and control;
- Discord among organizations; and
- Reform overload – with districts struggling to balance several externally imposed initiatives.

BUILDING COHESIVE LEADERSHIP SYSTEMS: LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from interviews with people engaged in this work, the RAND report offers practical lessons and recommendations for states and districts to make and sustain progress toward cohesive leadership systems at different stages of development.

Early-stage:
- *Consider local contexts and address challenges.* For example, states interested in leading the effort should select partner districts where the superintendent and board have aligned visions of reform. Conversely, states with limited resources or cultures

of local independence will probably find building cohesive leadership systems more difficult and may want to address these barriers.

- *Identify strong lead organizations and individuals*. Assess the capacity of the players and select the right leaders and organizations at the state and district levels with the ability, commitment and authority to coordinate and lead the work.
- *Capitalize on external expertise and funding*. Draw on outside sources of expertise on school leadership to assess capacity for the work and to identify areas in need of improvement.

Implementation stage:
- *Build trust and mend fences*. "Once trust has been established, it should be easier to develop common understandings, shared goals and joint ownership of the work," the authors write.
- *Engage a broad coalition of stakeholders*. "It is particularly important to routinely gather key state and district leaders into the same room to collectively discuss leadership and develop policies and initiatives to improve it."
- *Combine pressure and support*. To strike that balance, state agencies need to be willing to exercise their authority to drive statewide change, and to provide state-level support, they need to have the expertise that districts need.
- *Recognize innovative districts as "lead learners."* A key finding in the report is that districts can be the drivers and exemplars of statewide improvement initiatives. For example, the Jefferson County Public Schools have originated many of the state leadership initiatives in Kentucky.
- *Connect leadership efforts to standards and other reforms*. The most successful leadership improvement efforts were in states that anchored those reforms to other reform initiatives.

Sustaining change:
- *Solidify programs and funding through legislation and regulation*. Those interviewed by RAND cited the passage of regulations in areas such as instituting mentoring or redesigning pre-service principal training as critical steps in the reform effort.
- *Engage in continuous learning and improvement*. This includes collecting data over time to demonstrate what difference building a cohesive leadership system is making in states and districts.
- *Commit to engage in leadership improvement over the long term*. Even states that have made relatively good progress toward building cohesive leadership systems say that the gains take years

and are invariably hard-won. As one Iowa official told RAND: "This kind of work takes a tremendous amount of time and only now do we have a clear direction and feel we are about to make a significant breakthrough at the state level."

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[1] Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, (Executive Summary), Universities of Minnesota and Toronto, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, 2004, 3.

[2] *Leadership for Learning: Making the Connections Among State, District and School Policies and Practices*, A Wallace Foundation Perspective, 2006, 6.

RELATED KNOWLEDGE

These and other related publications may also be downloaded for free at Wallace's website:

Leadership for Learning: Making the Connections Among State, District and School Policies and Practices, The Wallace Foundation, 2006

State Strategies for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools and Districts, National Association of State Boards of Education, 2009

The District Leadership Challenge: Empowering Principals to Improve Teaching and Learning, Southern Regional Education Board, 2009

Strong Leaders Strong Schools: 2008 State Laws, National Conference of State Legislatures, 2009

Assessing the Effectiveness of School Leaders: New Directions and New Processes, The Wallace Foundation, 2009

Improving Leadership for Learning: Stories from the Field, University of Washington, 2009

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- Strengthen educational leadership to improve student achievement,
- Improve after-school learning opportunities, and
- Build appreciation and demand for the arts.