

District Office Leadership: Hero or Villain?

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For decades, school district offices, superintendents and school boards have been cast as “villains” in the drama of school reform and raising student achievement. This article presents research encompassing a different view of district leadership as the possible “hero” in these efforts. Recent studies by Harvard University (2007), Springboard Schools (2006), Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (2006), Marzano and Waters (2006), and The Wallace Foundation (2005), provide an insightful view of those best practices that support school and district wide improvement efforts. This article summarizes the key findings of each study and their similarities that include: (1) leadership, (2) coherence and alignment, (3) focus, (4) people resources, (5) teaching and learning and (6) balanced autonomy. The studies provide clear implications for programs that prepare future leaders in educational administration.

Introduction

In the context of raising student achievement, closing the achievement gap and effecting overall reform in our nation’s schools, there is a growing body of research that demonstrates that district office leadership has a significant impact on the performance of public schools. This impact has the possibility of either enabling or hindering school reform efforts. For the purposes of this article, the term “district(s)” is defined as central office, board of education and the superintendent.

Educating and preparing school and district leaders with the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to implement reform in our schools and districts, to raise achievement and close the achievement gap are surely essential and worthy functions of educational leadership programs across the country. The intent of this article is to illuminate research that identifies those leadership behaviors and district actions that provide strong support to schools in achieving these essential goals. These leadership behaviors and district actions have clear implications for coursework and programs in educational leadership provided our current and future school and leaders.

Villain?

Over the past two decades, district leadership has often been painted as the villain in efforts to improve our schools. School district offices have been cast as villains in the drama of school reform—intractable bureaucracies that either got in the way or, at best, were irrelevant to the task of improving

schools (Springboard Schools, 2006). In the late 1980s, former Secretary of Education, William Bennett characterized superintendents, district office staff and schools board members as part of the education “blob” soaking up resources and resisting reform without contributing to student achievement (Education Week, March 2, 1987). Supporting this claim, Bennett, Finn and Cribb (1999), reported that

the public school establishment is one of the most stubbornly intransigent forces on the planet. It is full of people and organizations dedicated to protecting established programs and keeping things just the way they are. Administrators talk of reform even as they are circling the wagons to fend off change, or preparing to outflank your innovation. (p. 628)

Protheroe noted in 1998:

the cost of school administration and its effect on the resources available for instruction has been the subject of countless speeches and op-ed articles and talk radio since then Secretary of Education William Bennett first applied the “blob” description to administration more than 10 years ago. Today, even staunch supporters of public education sometimes rely on the same misconceptions. (p. 26)

Hero?

Regrettably, the concept of “villain” or ‘blob” has been sustained over time. In sharp contrast to this negative view of district leadership recent studies have discussed the positive role districts can play in supporting school achievement. Taken in whole these studies provide clear support or the positive impact possible from superintendents, district office staff and board members when conditions and priorities are aligned with making schools more effective. These studies suggest that school district leaders can play a key role in improving schools and addressing the achievement gap. One of the best examples of how this is possible comes from the widely respected institute, Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel). Researchers at McRel (2006) reported that

twenty years ago former Secretary of Education William Bennett asserted that administrators are part of the problem—a “blob” getting in the way of real student success; however, our research demonstrates that, to the contrary, school district leaders can be part of the solution. (p. 1)

Mounting evidence continues to be reported that schools alone cannot sustain the systems, culture or resources needed for the major improvement of student achievement without the support of the district, district leadership or other governing entities that may include the state. In 2000, The Iowa Association of School Boards completed a major study of the effect of school boards on student achievement. Referred to as their Lighthouse Study, they found that boards in districts with high achievement showed clear differences in knowledge, beliefs and the conditions they supported for school renewal (Bartusek, 2000). Superintendent’s leadership is critical; successful reforms require constancy of purpose and stable and pre-

dictable district leadership for at least five years (Natkin as cited in Black, 2007). Moore-Johnson (1996) indicated that

the best superintendents team up with principals, teachers, and other staff to improve achievement. They support team efforts by providing resources, coaching and buffering staff during the change process, spending time in schools and classrooms, engaging in conversations about instruction, and encouraging staff to experiment to determine what works.

Fullan (2008) while acknowledging the key role of principals in school improvement reported that a complementary piece is essential in that organizational development and support must also be present for leaders to make a difference. Furthermore, he indicated while it may be possible for the heroic leader to change the organization for a time, it won't happen in numbers. The culture of the organization is too powerful for one or even many individuals to overcome. He concluded that efforts to reform schools are doomed unless educators can combine and integrate individual and organizational development, focusing on mutually reinforcing content and strategies. Catkins and Gunther (2007) examined conditions that need to exist for high poverty/low achieving schools to flourish. The authors reported that districts alone will not undertake the dramatic changes required for successful turnaround on their own. Rather, they suggested that states need to (1) provide support and direction for fundamental, not incremental, change; (2) establish operating conditions that support, rather than undermine the desired changes; (3) add new capacity in high-leverage school and district roles and establish turnaround partners; and (4) galvanize local capacity where it is currently trapped in dysfunctional settings.

Research and Reports on High Performing District Leadership

This article focuses on four of the largest and most comprehensive studies completed to date. These studies were completed by highly respected and well-funded research organizations. While the research on the importance of districts is continuing to grow, this paper will focus on four major research reports on the potential leadership and impact of high performing central or district offices (defined for these purposes as superintendents, central office staff and elected board members). These four reports represent research focused on California, as well as across the nation. These include: Harvard's Public Education Leadership Project—the PELP Coherence Framework (2007), "Minding the Gap: New Roles for School Districts in the Age of Accountability" from Springboard Schools (2006), "Leading for Learning—Central Office's Key Role in Improving Student Achievement" from the Wallace Foundation (2005), and McRel's "School District Leadership that Works: the Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement" by Waters and Marzano (2006). Common to

these research works and others is the central question: What do high performing districts do to lead and foster a process of improvement?

Harvard's PELP Coherence Framework

Published in 2007, as a joint effort of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Harvard Business School, the Public Education Leadership Project Coherence Framework was designed to help district leaders identify the key elements that support a district-wide improvement strategy, bring those elements into a coherent relationship with the strategy and each other, and guide the actions of people throughout the district in the pursuit of high levels of achievement for all students (Childress & Elmore, 2007). PELP researchers believed that in order to raise student achievement in all schools within a system, the organizational elements of a district which include its culture, structure and systems, resources, stakeholders and environment must be managed in a way that is coherent with an explicit strategy to improve teaching and learning in every classroom.

Recognizing the complexity of public schools and districts, the PELP framework reported coherence is achieved by: (1) connecting the instructional core with a district-wide strategy for improvement, (2) highlighting district elements that can support or hinder effective implementation, (3) identifying interdependencies among district elements, and (4) recognizing forces in the environment that have an impact on the implementation of strategy.

At the center of the PELP framework is the instructional core which represents the primary work of teaching and learning and is comprised of three interrelated components of (1) teachers' knowledge and skill, (2) students' engagement in their own learning, and (3) academically challenging content. Surrounding the instructional core is the key element of strategy, which may differ from district to district, but is an essential factor that ties the instructional core together and provides coherence in district actions and support. The framework further included five organizational elements that are linked to successful implementation of the district's strategy and must be attended to by leadership: culture, structures, systems, resources and stakeholders. The effectiveness of each of these elements is dependent on the creation of systems and coherent actions and processes established and supported by the district's leadership. Finally, the outermost layer of the framework represents the environment in which the district operates and includes statutes and regulations, funding, contracts and politics. While these environmental factors are often outside the direct control of leadership, they must nevertheless be attended to and addressed (Childress & Elmore, 2007). In their commentary on the framework, the authors emphasized the importance of school districts setting and utilizing their missions, objectives and milestones to further their work. These elements must be living, real and linked to district support, resources and accountability. They also emphasized the importance of the district's theory of action as a

driving force that in practice and action must support the instructional core. “Having a well articulated strategy helps leaders choose what to do, and just as importantly, what not to do” (Childress & Elmore, p. 4). Without a clear and consistent strategy districts are often prone to initiating multiple and conflicting programs, diluting the impact of scarce fiscal resources, sending mixed communications to key stakeholders and working on priorities that are misaligned or in actual conflict. Coherence of all systems, resources and a focused strategy are essential to district effectiveness enabling achieving schools.

Framework elements that support the instructional core and strategy are also essential to a coherent system. First among these elements is the importance of culture, especially a district culture where collaboration, high expectations and accountability are firmly embedded. Culture consists of the norms and behaviors in the organization and they must support student learning and accountability. Two additional framework elements include structure and systems. Structure helps define how the work of the district gets done and includes how staffs are organized, who makes or influences decisions and who has responsibility for results. The structure of an organization (district) can hinder or support the accomplishment of its work and mission. Like structure, the many systems within a school district can either hinder or support the work of schools. While both informal and formal systems occur in any organization, the purpose of these systems must be ideally to facilitate the primary work, mission and goals of the district and increase its efficiency and effectiveness. A fourth key element of the framework is resources and how they are utilized and leveraged to support the district’s strategy and related initiatives. Although money is often the first resource leaders identify and strategize, the authors also suggest that people and expenditures on people, the use of financial resources and technology are further elements to be aligned within a coherent district organization. The last element of the framework is identified as stakeholders, both people and groups inside and outside the organization who have a significant interest in the system and can influence the implementation and success of strategy. Because stakeholders often have differing views on what defines success, it is incumbent on district leaders to communicate and obtain buy-in from key stakeholders on the mission and strategy being implemented in the district (Childress & Elmore, 2007).

The most outer circle of the PELP Framework is the district’s environment comprised of regulations and statutes, contracts, funding and politics. Although often outside the direct control of the district, these factors must be recognized, planned for and managed. The authors suggested that district leaders must consider these factors in the environment and determine how they create demands, constraints or opportunities that have an impact on their ability to implement their district-wide strategy.

In summary, the PELP Coherence Framework is designed to focus the attention of public school district leaders on the central problem of increasing the achievement level of all students by making all the parts of the

district work in concert with its strategy. It clearly demonstrates that the action or lack of action by district leaders can have an enormous impact on the success of schools.

Springboard Schools' Minding the Gap: New Roles for School Districts in the Age of Accountability

In its 2006 study of high-performing, high poverty school districts in California, Springboard Schools found substantial systematic differences between high-performing and low-performing districts. Springboard purported that despite the emerging consensus that districts can play a leadership role in improving teaching and learning, many districts do not. Springboard believes that the most effective districts “mind the gap” by focusing attention on the groups of students who need the most help.

Springboard conducted a comprehensive analysis of test score trends over the past three years in California school districts. They selected districts that served at least 1,500 students in total and high percentages of students in poverty and English Language Learners (ELL), and then sorted these districts into a high-performing and low-performing group. After surveying principals to look for differences in the approaches taken by the two groups of districts, Springboard conducted in-depth case studies that gave them a more detailed look at what high-performing districts do.

Springboard found four systematic differences between high and low performers. Essential to the work of high performing districts was the in-depth use of data to drive a process of continuous improvement. Along with the use of data, these districts placed a premium on professional development with knowledge that is continually updated. High performers also established a culture and accountability that allowed for a balance between centralized and decentralized strategies. Although the balance was different between districts, it was none the less an important factor. Lastly, high performing districts endorsed the alignment of curriculum with standards, the utilization of diagnostic assessments to monitor student progress, and the creation of intervention programs to help struggling students (Springboard, 2006).

Springboard's study of more effective districts resulted in seven new roles for district central office leaders and recommendations for action that included: (1) develop and implement strategies to maintain focus and build organizational capacity; (2) invest and use multiple assessments; (3) recruit, manage and develop people and organizational capacity, culture and learning communities; (4) report to the public on all subgroups of achievement; (5) own the challenge of English Language Learners; (6) promote relationship building with unions and the board; and (7) don't get distracted (Springboard, 2006).

In addressing the role of school districts in local schools' efforts to increase student achievement, especially in light of NCLB, Springboard

(2006, p. 62) asked the question: “Can school districts, which many finger as the cause of the problem of poor school performance, become part of the solution?” Springboard’s report argued for a qualified “yes.” Springboard concluded their study with several high leverage recommendations for state and federal leaders. They believe that large system wide improvements in student achievement are not possible without major new investments (on the scale of parallel investments in understanding best practices in teaching reading) in understanding and supporting implementation of district-level best practices. There must be a sustained policy focus on accountability including district-level accountability. State and national leaders must invest in capacity-building in school districts. Lastly, to build and sustain these overarching improvement efforts districts must be supported in the creation of support systems that encompasses coaching, consulting, professional development, and technical assistance.

The Wallace Foundation’s Leading for Learning: Central Office’s Key Role in Improving Student Achievement

In a 2005 supplement to Education Week, the Wallace Foundation published a report on the significance of district or central offices in supporting schools in raising student achievement entitled “Leading for Learning.” The report focused on the concept that once overlooked, central offices are now seen as playing a key role in improving student achievement. While Wallace acknowledges the importance of school level leadership and policies of site-based management and whole-school reform prevalent in the 1990s, they proposed that to see large scale improvement across all schools in a district that strong district leadership is needed.

In cooperation with the Stupski Foundation, a Mill Valley California based group that helps districts with strategic planning, Wallace looked at two school systems that had re-established the role of the central office in guiding instructional improvement. Their report quoted Hammond, who shared “either you believe in district reform, or you’re going to have to be extremely patient in waiting for a school-by-school turnaround” (Wallace, 2005, S3). The two districts, both of which worked with the Stupski Foundation, have sought greater consistency across schools in content and teaching methods.

Wallace reported that both districts have seen increased student success while creating new ways for teachers to learn together and use student data. Wallace reported that many experts see the growing assertiveness of district leaders as a natural consequence of the movement for higher academic standards that has dominated education policymaking for more than a decade. “It’s too much, they say, to presume that every school has within it the capacity to bring its students to the levels of achievement now demanded of them. When you have a policy environment now that expects change to occur at scale, that means that districts have to improve all schools, essentially simultaneously,” said Warren Simmonds, the executive director of

the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (Wallace, 2005, S4). Wallace also reported that mounting evidence suggests that effective schools are most often found in districts with strong system wide guidance. Similarly, in 2002, the Council of Great City Schools identified parallels among improving districts in an influential report, “Foundations for Success” (Wallace, 2006).

Some of Wallace’s findings paralleled the work of Springboard and included practices in which each district established a common curriculum, set up training and monitoring systems to ensure consistent approaches toward instruction, and made frequent use of student performance data to inform decision-making. The Wallace report quoted comments from leaders from the Council of Great City Schools, the National Center for Educational Accountability and the Broad Foundation, all in agreement that effective schools are greatly enhanced within districts that provide support for the overall instructional program, direction, technical assistance and professional development.

Wahlstrom and Leithwood (as cited in Black, 2007) identified a number of important practices at the core of superintendent leadership. They found that superintendents in districts focused on student achievement emphasized (1) setting direction; (2) established purpose, vision, goals and expectations; (3) communicated the direction; and (4) motivated and influenced others to work on achieving goals. These superintendents also focused on developing individuals by expanding the capacity of other leaders and staff to achieve goals, provided stimulation to learn and change, reinforced examples of theories and best practices, and supported individuals at all levels. In affecting system wide change, these superintendents made major efforts to redesign the organization and established intrinsic commitments to student achievement, instituted collaborative teams, and ensured that the district’s culture and structure supported continuous improvement (Wahlstrom & Leithwood as cited in Black, 2007).

School District Leadership That Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement

In September, 2006, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel) published a meta-analysis of research on school district leadership and the role of the superintendent. Researchers Waters and Marzano (2006) retrieved 4,500 non-repeating titles and then narrowed their study to 200 documents that appeared to meet their identified parameters. Of the 200 documents reviewed, 27 reported a correlation between district leadership and academic achievement and used a standardized measure of student achievement or some other index based on a standardized measure. Altogether, these studies involved 2,817 districts and the achievement scores of 3.4 million students, resulting in what McRel researchers believe to be the largest-ever quantitative review of research on superintendents.

Four major findings emerged from this work that again reinforce and re-

state the pivotal role of district leadership—as a hero or villain in supporting school level reform to increase student achievement. These include:

1. District-level leadership matters. Waters and Marzano found that when district leaders carry out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected.
2. Effective superintendents focus their effort on creating goal-oriented districts. Within this finding the researchers found five district-level leadership responsibilities that produce gains in student achievement: (a) collaborative goal setting, (b) non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) board alignment and support of district goals, (d) monitoring achievement and instructional goals and (e) use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement.
3. Effective districts establish defined autonomy. Waters and Marzano found somewhat contradictory findings when it came to the issue of school and principal autonomy. Some studies found a positive correlation between building autonomy and student achievement while others found site-based management had a negative correlation. The authors concluded that effective superintendents may provide principals with what they term “defined autonomy.” In these districts, superintendents have set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, however, provide school leadership teams with both the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals. This balance provides flexibility within the boundaries of defined district or school goals.
4. Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement. Although not a focus of the study, Waters and Marzano found a correlation between superintendent tenure in a district and student achievement. This finding is in stark contrast to those detractors who claim that district leadership is a block or hindrance, rather than a positive factor (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

In their conclusions, the McRel researchers refuted the belief of Bennett, Finn, Cribb (1999) and others who negate the impact of district leaders. Waters and Marzano (2006) explained:

while one can certainly find examples of local school district bureaucracies and superintendent behaviors that stand in the way of efforts to improve student learning, our research does not support the broad-stroke condemnation of superintendents, district office staff, and school board members. To the contrary, our findings indicate that when district leaders effectively address specific responsibilities, they can have a profound, positive impact on student achievement in their districts (p. 8).

Concluding Thoughts: Putting the Pieces Together, Commonalities and Implications

In contrast to those that have characterized districts as the problem or villain in school reform and raising student achievement, this article has provided an overview of recent research that portrays district leaders as

possible heroes, supporters and champions of student achievement in their schools. This article has reviewed the key findings of four major recent studies that have examined the possible impact of district leadership. In this era of increased accountability, high expectations and serious sanctions for low performing schools and districts, the impact of successful leadership at the district level is more important than ever before.

Six major trends or findings regarding district leadership or leaders cut across all of the reports and research reviewed in this paper include (1) the importance of leadership—vision, mission, values and support, (2) the importance of systems alignment and coherence within the district, (3) the need to focus on key priorities and initiatives, (4) the importance of collaborating with people in the organization, (5) the need to make teaching and learning the very core of the district's work, and (6) the achievement of a delicate, but important balance between district and school autonomy.

The question of whether or not district leaders are viewed as heroes or villains looms at every district and school within across the nation. Politics and rhetoric aside, some districts are large, seemingly immovable entities that continue to block, stagnate or significantly slow the progress of schools in their reform and student achievement efforts. On the opposite spectrum, the research is clear that district leaders can make a positive difference in supporting, empowering and developing scalable excellence across their schools and districts. We have the knowledge to achieve what is best for our students and communities.

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