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# Imagine the Unimaginable:

## Professors and Practitioners Together as Learners

*by Tim Waters, Tom Alsbury, Dave Else, and Greg Reed*

### Breaking ground in Iowa

Imagine a state administrators' association accepting the responsibility to develop a set of standards and indicators for the professional development and evaluation of principals in their state. Imagine that the association fulfills this responsibility only after checking to be certain that these standards and indicators are aligned with the state's standards for preparation and licensure and reflect the best available research on school-level leadership.

Now imagine that this association brings together the state education department, intermediate service agencies, and professors of educational administration in a working partnership. This partnership focuses its attention on preparation, licensure, professional development, and evaluation programs to ensure that all share a common set of standards based on current research. Continue to imagine that the professors are interested in deepening their knowledge and understanding of the research embedded in these standards. Finally, imagine that the professors join with practitioners as learners in a long-term, rigorous, professional development

program sponsored by the intermediate service agencies.

To many, the scenario described above is beyond imagination. In places where higher education actually is an ivory tower, where the chasm between academics and the realities of the field is too deep and too broad to span, where professors have all of the answers and believe they have nothing to learn from the practitioners they prepare, this is, indeed, a fantasy. In Iowa, however, what some would see as "fantastic" is unfolding in real time.

The story of what is happening in Iowa to strengthen the preparation, licensure, and professional development of education leaders is remarkable. It is one that needs to be both told and emulated across the country. What follows is part of the story, from the perspectives of an education research and service organization, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), and from three higher education professors, who are members of the Iowa Council of Professors of Educational Administration (ICPEA) and have helped to design and lead this ground-breaking program.

## Learning about leadership

Since 2001, the School Administrators of Iowa (SAI) has been developing and refining standards for the evaluation and professional development of principals. In the spring of 2005, before completing their work on these standards, the leadership of SAI asked McREL to review the standards to accomplish two objectives:

1. Determine the degree to which Iowa's standards include or reflect McREL's research on school level leadership (Waters, Marzano, and McNulty 2003; Marzano, Waters, McNulty, ASCD 2005), and
2. Identify any of the research-based responsibilities and/or practices in McREL's findings that were not included in these standards.

SAI invited key members of their association, Iowa's Chief State School Officer, personnel in the State Education Agency, the steering committee of a Wallace Foundation-funded State Action for Education Leadership Partnership (SAELP) project, executives of several Area Education Agencies (AEAs), and members of ICPEA to join them in this effort.

SAI, with funding from the Wallace Foundation, created an opportunity for this group of Iowa education leaders to deepen their understanding of McREL's research on the effects of principal leadership on student achievement as reported in *School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results* (ASCD, 2005). They discussed the implications of this research for programs that prepare principals, for higher education faculty members who teach in these programs, and for the professional development of principals.

In addition, this group discussed the implications of current critiques of education leadership programs (Levine, 2005) and the degree to which these critiques apply to or characterize their programs. Finally, the group discussed the variety of public and private programs in Iowa and across the country involved in the preparation of educational leaders. In the context of these discussions, several of the professors of education administration agreed that not only could they benefit from a long-term, rigorous professional development program to ensure that their own knowledge and skills are current, but they would do so along with practitioners in a program sponsored by the AEAs.

In October 2005, four Iowa AEAs launched McREL *Balanced Leadership* professional development consortia. These leadership consortia involved more than 320 participants, including principals, assistant principals, superintendents and other central office administrators, AEA staff, and professors of education administration. These programs, which range from one to three years, are designed to help participants develop the deep knowledge and understanding they need to know *what* to do as well as *how*, *why* and *when* to apply the latest research on effective leadership in their respective roles.

Professors of education administration joined with practitioners as learners in this program. They engaged in structured learning activities that focused discussion and reflection on the use of McREL's research by principals already in the field and on their preparation of aspiring principals. By learning together, practitioners benefited from professors' expertise while professors learned first-hand from practitioners about their real-life

challenges and how they planned to apply what they were learning to address those challenges.

Is all of this hard to imagine? To better imagine the unimaginable, consider the perspective of three of the participating professors, described below.

## **Looking at the past and present of principal leadership**

In the early 1980s, effective schools research identified *instructional leadership* as one of the seven correlates of effective schools (Association for Effective Schools, 1996). According to this research, in effective schools the “principal understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional program” (pp. 1–2). Since that time, the principal has been at the forefront of numerous research studies and been recognized as a key to successful schools. It is this conclusion, confirmed by McREL’s research (Waters, Marzano, and McNulty 2003; Waters and Grubb 2004; Waters and Grubb 2005; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005) that motivates professors of education administration to prepare individuals to serve as principals. It is also what compelled professors to join Iowa’s practitioners in this professional development program.

Too often, colleges of education, while contributing to the body of knowledge through scholarly activity, lag behind in responding to the needs of K–12 schools. As a result, when it comes to school reform efforts, K–12 practitioners’ common refrain has become “Where is higher education?” In Iowa, professors of education

administration have answered this question with actions. These professors are fully engaged with practitioners in a year-long opportunity to learn with and from one another about leadership that makes a difference in schools.

Until recent years, principal preparation programs have been theory based and slow in helping students transfer what they have learned into practical application in the real world. To the credit of educational leadership faculty across the country, principal preparation programs have become more performance based with considerable field-experience practicum and internship opportunities.

Nonetheless, higher education still needs to be more involved in school improvement efforts and recognize that we can learn not only from our own research, but also from external research and development centers. It is time for higher education to partner with external researchers and to help translate research into practice. In Iowa, this time has arrived.

If current research on leadership and student achievement is to have a significant impact on schooling, research and development experts, K–12 practitioners and mentors, principal preparation institution faculty, state associations and state departments of education must come together to nurture a seamless system of continuous learning, professional development, and effective practice. The evolution of such a system is exactly what is happening in Iowa and is called the *Iowa School Leadership System (ISLS)*.

## The Iowa School Leadership System

This article focuses on one aspect of the ISLS, the Iowa Leadership Academy (ILA) Principal Center training component. As shown in Figure 1, the administrative professional development program will ultimately offer several additional training options, including the ILA Superintendent/School Board Center, ILA Futures Center, and the Executive Coaching Center.

The ILA Principals Center is a three-year training program offered as entry-level training for practicing principals. The ILA Superintendent/School Board Center provides training to superintendent and school board teams. The ILA Futures Center will provide leaders with more advanced and individually designed training content and delivery focused on data analysis and preparing their schools and students for the future. Finally, the ILA Executive Coaching Center is a consultation service offered to individual in-service leaders and district teams working on school reform projects.

The ISLS will provide a coherent, comprehensive administrative training program for aspiring and practicing school leaders that will improve their leadership skills, maximize state funds, and ultimately, lead to improved student achievement. Creating a coherent and comprehensive approach to leadership preparation allows for assessing administrators' progress as they move through training components over their careers. In addition, reducing the duplication of efforts across administrator programs not only supports the creation of more robust training programs at each level of the system, but also provides savings to districts for administrative training, allowing for more funds to be directed to student needs. As a result, leaders receive better training to guide school reform efforts and also have more funds available to improve student achievement, especially among low-performing students.

[Figure 1]: The Iowa School Leadership System



## **Motivating professors to participate**

Professors of education leadership and administration in every higher education institution in the country need to ask serious questions about their roles and responsibilities. How does each institution's principal preparation program become a part of school improvement efforts? Specifically, how do each institution's principal preparation programs affect K–12 student achievement? First and foremost, professors must recognize they play a role in, and have an impact on, student achievement through the leaders they prepare. They, perhaps more than any others in the academy, possess the greatest opportunity to impact achievement in the K–12 system because they can influence aspiring principals and their perceptions of what is really important in educational leadership. Clearly articulating principal responsibilities and associated practices that correlate with student achievement, helping aspiring principals discover how to apply the research and practice under the tutelage of a mentor, and providing constructive feedback are initial steps in being a part of the learning community. This was what motivated professors of educational administration to participate in the Iowa Leadership Academy program.

Higher education faculty have much to learn from others and benefit by becoming a part of a body of learners. To be most effective, learning needs to occur in settings with practitioners and external researchers, not in isolation. For higher education faculty, the residual benefits of participating in a learning community are that practitioners and policymakers view higher

education faculty as contributing partners and champions of effective practice, rather than simply as storehouses of knowledge. The opportunity to learn shoulder-to-shoulder with practitioners was the second motivator for professors of educational administration to participate in the Iowa Leadership Academy program.

Those who prepare principals are also responsible for orchestrating the convergence of course work and meaningful practicum experiences that help aspiring principals develop the knowledge and skills they need to improve student achievement. Creating meaningful field experiences not only benefits aspiring principals, but also enables higher education to be a part of something bigger than itself and become a meaningful contributor to school improvement initiatives. This is the third motivator for professor participation in the Iowa Leadership Academy program.

Finally, educational leadership programs must prepare aspiring principals to be consumers of research, developing their capacity to transfer research findings into practice. Course embedded practicum and guided internships are fertile ground for developing collaboration, consensus building, direction setting, planning, problem solving, decision making, relationship building, communication, and situational awareness skills. All of these skills are essential core competencies for effective school leaders. Thus, the opportunity to help aspiring principals develop these skills is the final motivator for professor participation in the Iowa Leadership Academy program.

## Putting it all together

Here is how the various components come together at the educational leadership preparation course level. Aspiring principals examine the research on the leader's responsibilities in school improvement that correlate to student achievement. They then undertake a course-embedded practicum in which they work beside their mentor to analyze student achievement data in their school or district. Based on the analysis and established need for improving student achievement, the student and mentor articulate a change initiative. Having learned the characteristics of first-order and second-order change, the student designates the initiative as first- or second-order change and applies the appropriate balanced leadership responsibilities. Finally, the student develops a set of specific actions to fulfill each responsibility (Marzano, Waters, McNulty, ASCD, 2005). The result is a blueprint or plan for implementing the change initiative. During the capstone internship, the aspiring principal actually leads the initiative, implementing the blueprint under the guidance of the mentor and university professor.

In addition to building the aspiring principal's knowledge base and developing essential leadership skills, this approach has the potential to bring the student and the mentor into a different, deeper relationship. Rather than a novice learning at the master's feet, the student and mentor develop a mutually beneficial

relationship. Together they immerse themselves in research and best practice. They share leadership responsibilities and perhaps most important, they enter into continuous dialogue and reflection around a common goal. Rather than being a passive observer walking in the mentor's shadow, the student becomes an active player in fulfilling responsibilities, practicing skills, receiving feedback and practicing again. The mentor, by giving up some of the leadership responsibilities positively correlated to change, is free to give greater focus to culture, communication, structure and input — responsibilities that teachers and other stakeholders often perceive their leaders as overlooking during the change process.

When new administrators leave the preparation mentor program and enter their first principal or superintendent positions, they continue to be provided with expert mentor support for their first year on the job through the Iowa Mentoring and Induction Program, another part of the overall leadership system shown in Figure 1. Subsequently, leaders continue to be provided with coordinated and aligned training programs through the Iowa Leadership Academy Centers. The leadership system, in addition to providing aligned training content, support, and follow-up to the application of skills in practice, acts as a framework for statewide evaluation and feedback loops throughout leaders' career cycles.

Is all of this unimaginable? Not in Iowa.

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# Imagine the Unimaginable

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