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October 2009 | Volume 67 | Number 2

Developing School Leaders Pages 45-49

Leadership Development: The Larger Context

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**Developing individual school leaders is just a start.
Meaningful gains in student achievement will require
whole-system reform.**



The common wisdom today is that school principals should be instructional leaders. But most principals face a major stumbling block—they don't know what instructional leadership means or how to do it. For school leaders to fulfill this role, leadership development needs to be job-embedded, organization-embedded, and system-embedded. Few leadership development programs currently meet the first of these successively rigorous criteria, and almost no programs meet the other two.

Job-Embedded Learning

Job-embedded school leadership development consists of cultivating, developing, and continuously supporting individual leaders in real, on-the-job settings. A 2009 study by Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr found that relatively few leadership development programs have strong job-embedded components. The study looked in-depth at eight exemplary programs¹ and found that they

- Explicitly recruit dynamic teachers and leaders into programs that focus on instructional and organizational transformation.
- Create a theoretically rich and practice-sensitive curriculum linking theory to practice.
- Wrap relevant coursework around field-based experiences organized so that candidates learn a coherent form of practice from expert leaders and instructors.
- Blend coaching that models and supports practice with analytic work that clarifies the basis for practice.
- Create cohorts of professionals who learn to collaborate and turn to one another for learning and resources.
- Secure the financial support and other material resources that allow candidates to spend significant time learning about practice *in* practice.

These programs focus on the nitty-gritty of success. By that, I mean apprentice leaders have the opportunity to observe, participate in, and learn from a specific set of processes that exemplify high-quality leadership in action. Successful job-embedded leadership development programs place their candidates in schools such as those identified by Ontario's Schools on the Move initiative, which have registered strong achievement gains in literacy and numeracy over three successive years (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). These schools have collaborative cultures; focus on specific, high-yield instructional practices; have distributed leadership clearly headed by the principal; use assessment data precisely to improve learning; and participate in learning networks with other schools. A job-embedded internship in such a school

enables the developing leader to experience up close what effective leaders do to get results.

And it works. On almost every component, graduates of the exemplary programs studied by Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2009) had significantly more positive perceptions of the quality of their experiences than did those in a national sample (typically 4.4 on a 5-point scale, compared with 3.5).

Even so, job-embedded leadership development is not enough. Why not? If you look closely, most job-embedded programs are individualistic. They may include cohorts, mentors, and coaches, but such components are primarily in the service of producing better individual leaders.

A developing leader who receives a strong apprenticeship in an exemplary school is not necessarily prepared to take on his or her first job in a less-than-exemplary school—to tackle the challenge of improving another organization. There are not enough exemplary schools to go around. Indeed, the main point of education reform is to make all schools highly effective. And for that, leadership development programs need to focus on developing not just individuals, but also organizations and systems.

Organization-Embedded Learning

Organization-embedded leadership development focuses directly on improving the organization—its culture, structure, and processes. As City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2009) make clear in their groundbreaking *Instructional Rounds in Education*, this work is difficult:

You can tighten up on standards and incentives, raising the level of expected performance. You can clarify the content you expect to be covered ... and adopt curriculum materials to support that. You can fill the system with information about student performance and create the expectation that people will monitor and change the practice. You can provide training and professional development for teachers and administrators and you can provide support for schools that are building higher-level instructional practice. The aggregate effect of these measures is that some schools move in the desired direction; some essentially stay where they are ... and typically some schools actually continue to get worse against an increasingly challenging standard. (p. 36)

Organization-embedded learning is essential to meaningful leadership development. Although the 2009 Darling-Hammond study found that participants in job-embedded leadership development programs felt more qualified to lead on just about every important dimension, an additional finding from that study is telling. Principals who graduated from the exemplary programs and a sample of comparison principals who graduated from typical programs were asked to rate their schools on a scale of 1–5 on three school improvement strategies (teacher collaboration; active shared, distributed leadership; and data-driven decision making/organizational learning) and four school climate conditions (coherence; accessible, high-quality instruction; teacher commitment; and student effort and engagement). The researchers found no differences between the two sets of schools. Thus, when you look beyond the successful development of new leaders as individuals and move into the arena of school improvement, even exemplary job-embedded programs produce virtually no benefits on scale.

I'm not saying that better-prepared principals don't do some good. But I am saying that job-embedded development of individuals is not the same as organizational development. You need to do both simultaneously. Individual new leaders, no matter how good they are, will not generate widespread organizational change across the system.

We must, then, work on changing the culture of schools as we incorporate new leaders. As City and colleagues (2009) note, "Virtually all the low-performing schools we work with are overwhelmed with people from multiple sectors and multiple levels of government telling them what to do" (p. 9). Unfortunately, all this knowledge and support often falls on an organization that doesn't have the internal structures, processes, and norms that are necessary to deploy that knowledge in classrooms.

Leadership development for school improvement takes place within learning organizations, where

"learning is the work" (Fullan, 2008, p. 75). This means that successful organizations (in practice, only a small minority of schools) organize themselves to learn and problem solve all the time. The main focus is directly on improving the organization and its culture as well as developing better individual leaders.

An example is Jersey Public School in Ontario, part of the York Region District School Board, a large, multicultural, urban district just north of Toronto. In this school, the principal, literacy coach, and grade-level teachers examine and assess student writing samples, identify effective instructional practices, invest in capacity building with other teachers, monitor progress, and on and on. In three years, Jersey doubled the percentage of its 3rd grade and 6th grade students who attained high proficiency on the province's writing assessment. Jersey's educators are learning in context. They are developing a deep, shared understanding of the nature of effective practice.

But even when schools like Jersey work directly on organizational development, it is not enough. System change means all schools, in all districts.

System-Embedded Learning

The term *system-embedded* encompasses the education system beyond the school. It can consist of a whole state, province, or country, but the school district is an important piece in its own right.

A study by Louis and colleagues (2009) for the Wallace Foundation confirms the importance of school-embedded reform and adds significant new findings about the school and district combination. The study collected data from 180 schools, 43 districts, and 9 states. It found that the most powerful source of the districts' influence on schools and students was "the development of school leaders' collective sense of efficacy about their jobs" (p. 10). In districts that had a high collective sense of efficacy, district and school leaders worked together to establish a culture focused on student achievement. These districts gave school leaders continual opportunities to master the skills necessary to promote student learning and established structures for schools to learn from one another.

The measure of collective efficacy is that school and district leaders have confidence that they and their peers can together figure out how to make progress—that is, their ongoing interaction and experience with one another build the trust and knowledge that they are collectively responsible and good at their work. It is not the sum total of individual leadership qualities that counts, but the fact that people learn from and identify with one another. System learning is an interactive activity, not an individual one.

A similar effect can be seen in a finding that Reeves (2008) identified at the school level. He found that when only a few teachers implemented a given effective practice, there was not much effect on student learning even for those teachers' students, but "when 90 percent of teachers implemented the same practice, a high percentage of students scored at the proficient level" (p. 40).

Thus, when a critical mass of teachers use the same practice, they create an interactive effect. The analogy is this— when, say, 90 percent of school principals in a district are engaged in instructional leadership within and across clusters of schools, they positively affect one another. This is a *system* effect, and we see it in the Wallace finding that when a district has its act together, the degree of collective efficacy increases and the district as a whole does better.

Successful districts, as systems, foster organization-embedded work in *all* their schools—partly through direct, purposeful developmental work between the school and the district, and partly through creating school-to-school clusters and networks whereby schools learn from one another. Rather than starting with individual leadership, these districts focus first on concrete, specific improvement goals and then figure out how individual and collective leadership can help (see Sharratt & Fullan, 2009, for one example).

But system-embedded learning is not just a matter of addressing leadership at the district level. It also requires coherence among all elements of the system, including curriculum, instruction, assessment, and intervention practices. Each element that affects school and classroom improvement must be integrated into a seamless whole. This alignment and cohesion produces collective efficacy and results across the entire district.

Districts that pursue such coherence and embed a districtwide culture of "learning is the work" do exist, but they are distinctly in the minority. It is hard work to do, and even harder to keep on doing given the policy churn at the district, state, and federal levels.

Whole-System Reform

Leadership development is certainly part of school improvement, and a crucial part at that. But it must be a means to an end, combining job-embedded, organization-embedded, and system-embedded reform for the moral purpose of raising the bar and closing the achievement gap for all students.

Unfortunately, the bigger system—state, federal, and province—is not doing well when it comes to system-embedded leadership. Louis and colleagues (2009) arrived at this blunt conclusion:

Few states have comprehensive approaches to reform; state agencies and districts are provided with general directions but limited guidance for how to achieve the goal of improving student learning. (p. 139)

Whole-system reform is the work that my colleagues and I are engaged in now, in Ontario and around the world. We are developing "leadership in motion" that moves whole districts and whole systems (Fullan, in press). Leadership development is a core piece of this agenda, but only as part of a set of policies, strategies, and practices that focus on reforming the whole system. This strategy, as we are implementing it across all schools and districts in the public education system in Ontario, includes six fundamentals:

- Develop the entire teaching profession.
- Focus on a small number of ambitious priorities and do them well.
- Work directly on capacity building by focusing on the two-way street between instructional improvement and assessment—developing, identifying, and spreading effective practices.
- Invest in leadership development at all levels in the service of the core work.
- Establish a focused, mostly nonpunitive, comprehensive, relentless intervention strategy.
- Use money to drive reform in the service of the previous five fundamentals (Fullan & Levin, 2009).

When all is said and done, job-embedded leadership development for individuals will not have the necessary effect, nor will the organizational success of a few schools. We must develop strategies that affect the whole system—all schools simultaneously. The bottom line is that if leadership development is not explicitly part and parcel of more comprehensive organizational and system reform, it is incomplete.

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Endnote

¹ The study looked at four preservice or preparation programs—Bank Street College, Delta State University, University of Connecticut, and University of San Diego City Schools—and four inservice programs—Hartford (Connecticut) School District; Jefferson County (Kentucky) Public Schools (also included preservice); Region 1 in New York City; and the San Diego (California) City Schools.

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