

# THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

## WHAT'S INSIDE

**District Leadership Permit, don't proscribe, to build leadership.**  
**PAGE 2**

**Focus on NSDC's Standards Do the right thing!**  
**PAGE 3**

**NSDC Tool Iowa individual administrator professional development plan and SMART goals worksheet.**  
**PAGES 4-5**

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## SUPERINTENDENT STAYS ON COURSE WITH PERSONAL LEARNING PLAN

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

**T**om Narak is the superintendent of a good school district. He wants to make it great.

Faced with changing demographics in West Des Moines, Iowa, and the national pressure for greater accountability for improving student learning, Narak said he regularly turns to just a single, one-page document he keeps on his desk.

The document is his individual professional learning plan. In Iowa, the School Administrators of Iowa (SAI) is working, with the support of The Wallace Foundation, to better connect state and district policy to support leadership that leverages student improvement. And administrator professional learning plans are a key piece of that effort.

"It's easy for other things to come up," Narak



said. "My challenge is to make sure I devote myself to areas where the final results are really important, dedicate the necessary resources, and look for more tangible connections to student learning. That's where the work is more challenging."

Developing a personal learning plan helps focus those efforts. Narak, for example, will concentrate on improving student achieve-

ment through effective instructional and assessment practices — his general goal. He then set a more specific goal of closing the achievement gap. He set four leadership goals, including becoming involved in activities to promote cultural proficiency and developing a plan to recruit and retain minority faculty, and three learning goals,

*Continued on p. 6*



Hayes Mizell  
is NSDC's  
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**Leaders not only keep school systems afloat, they keep a steady hand on the tiller, skillfully guiding public education to a more productive destination.**

Read Hayes Mizell's collected columns at [www.nsd.org/news/authors/mizell.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/news/authors/mizell.cfm).

## Permit, don't proscribe, to build leadership

Public education is crying out for leaders. This may seem strange when there is no shortage of people in leadership positions. They have attained degrees, certification, experience, and titles that qualify them to direct and supervise other educators. Yet, not all people in leadership positions are leaders. Many believe their primary role is to keep the public school system operating efficiently. This is important, as becomes apparent when operations falter, raising new doubts about the system's viability. But leaders not only keep school systems afloat, they keep a steady hand on the tiller, skillfully guiding public education to a more productive destination.

Public schools exist, or should exist, solely to prepare all students to become independent, self-sufficient adults. To achieve that objective, school systems must help students develop particular knowledge and skills. This requires engaging all students in high-quality educational experiences while also providing them attention, care, and social-emotional support. It appears to be a relatively simple process, but is in fact highly complex, made all the more so by myriad forces seeking to control, direct, or influence the context, process, and content of public education.

Without effective leaders, public education is often a maelstrom of competing interests. Attention and effort can shift from students' needs to responding to the most powerful or persistent adult voices. School system leaders understand that one of their roles is to modulate and, in some cases, resist these demands, ensuring that the system's focus remains on student learning. This is often exhausting work and certainly not the reason most leaders chose public education as a career. Nevertheless, leaders prepare for and embrace this role, understanding that their success directly impacts student performance.

School system leaders, however, are not su-

perheroes. Their effectiveness depends not on special powers, but on their skill to inspire, mobilize, and support front-line practitioners. Their vision is shaped not by the latest education trends, but by a simple resolve that the school system must work to the maximum demonstrable benefit of all children. They organize and deploy the school system's financial, human, and technological resources to enhance the intensity and effectiveness of students' instruction. Leaders know they cannot do this alone, so they identify and cultivate allies, from the board room to the classroom, with whom they collaborate to make student learning *the* priority.

Solving problems is always a major role for school system leaders, and it is important they meet this responsibility with creativity, deliberation, and patience. But problem solving can also become a refuge from taking initiative to *prevent* problems. If an educator defines his or her role as that of a problem solver, there certainly will always be problems to solve. Leaders, on the other hand, define their roles as pursuing an aggressive agenda to raise levels of educator and student performance. Because they are conscientious in attending to operational and educational issues to advance that agenda, they are able to manage problems rather than vice versa.

School system leaders are in demand because public schools are not educating all students effectively. Educators in leadership positions who focus almost exclusively on implementing prescriptive procedures, rules and regulations, and making sure others do so, are not leaders. There is an appropriate role for such individuals, but while they dominate, school systems will continue to function as they do now, with the same results. If school systems and communities want to improve academic outcomes for all students, they must expect educators to lead, prepare and support them, and, most importantly, must permit them to do so.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

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## Do the right thing!

Developing the principal's leadership skills has taken center stage in education reform discussions. Information and research has been available detailing what critical skills and knowledge school administrators need in order to enhance student learning. But research on the critical role of district leaders has been less available until now.

A new meta-analysis of 27 studies, conducted by Robert Marzano and Tim Waters (2009), identifies essential initiatives district leaders enact to improve student learning. When these leadership actions occur, district leadership has a 0.24 correlation with student learning. District leadership can increase student learning 9.5 percentile points.

So what are these tasks and how do they intersect with NSDC's Standards for Staff Development (2001) and accompanying Innovation Configuration maps (Roy & Hord, 2003)? Five responsibilities of effective district leaders are to:

- **Ensure collaborative goal setting**, involving stakeholders in developing nonnegotiable goals for achievement *and* instruction. District leaders have a responsibility to involve appropriate stakeholder groups — especially school board members and building level administrators — in the goal setting process. (*Leadership and Resource Standards*)
- **Establish nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction.** Since the quality of instruction affects student achievement, classroom instruction is a critical district function. Yet, this does *not* mean that the district establishes a single instructional model that all teachers must employ. The district establishes an instructional

framework that helps teachers engage in professional conversations about teaching and learning, which is collaborative, job-embedded professional learning. (*Data-driven, Research-Based, Design, and Collaboration Standards*)

- **Create board alignment with and support of district goals.** District leaders ensure that the local school board supports district goals and sustains them as high priority for at least five years. (*Learning Communities, Leadership, and Resource Standards*)

NSDC STANDARD

**Leadership:** Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.

- **Monitor achievement and instructional goals.** Continually monitoring student achievement and teachers' high-quality instruction is one of district leaders' primary responsibilities. This monitoring is not for evaluation but to ensure that district staff remain focused on teaching and learning. (*Data-Driven and Evaluation Standards*)

- **Allocate resources to support achievement and instruction goals.** The vital resources of time, money, personnel, and materials ensure the district accomplishes its goals. District leaders must commit funding to professional development for teachers *and* principals. (*Resource Standard*)

Leaders, it has been said, don't merely do things right — they do the *right* things! Research describes the right things for district leaders. They also strongly align with NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, as well as the Innovation Configuration maps. As district accountability for high student achievement amplifies, all of these resources can help district leaders determine the right things to do to ensure that quality instruction occurs in all classrooms — with the result of higher student achievement.

**IOWA INDIVIDUAL ADMINISTRATOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

to be developed collaboratively between administrator and supervisor

NAME:

SCHOOL:

DISTRICT:

AREA EDUCATION AGENCY:

**District or building focus**

**STEP 1: General district goal area** (from Comprehensive School Improvement Plan or other improvement plan) If using a goal area not included in a plan, include data which show the need for focusing your leadership actions in this area.

**STEP 2: Specific school or district goal** (for above general goal area)

**STEP 3**

Specific leadership goals* 1-3 things the administrator will DO to increase likelihood that goals in steps 1 & 2 will be achieved.	Related standard Iowa Standard for School Leaders	Indicators of progress Document the effect of chosen indicators.	Start & end dates	Review date(s)	Items discussed during review

**STEP 4**

Learning goals* 1-3 things the administrator will LEARN to increase likelihood that goals in Steps 1 & 2 will be achieved.	Related standard Iowa Standard for School Leaders	Indicators of progress Document the effect of chosen indicators.	Start & end dates	Review date(s)	Items discussed during review

\* Administrators are encouraged to use SMART goal design to develop their goals. See p. 5.

**STEP 5**

**Supports for plan implementation** (check all that apply and describe)

Supervisor/board: \_\_\_\_\_  Area education agency/regional: \_\_\_\_\_

Peer: \_\_\_\_\_  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Source: Iowa Department of Education, [www.iowa.gov/educate](http://www.iowa.gov/educate)

Administrator signature/date \_\_\_\_\_ Supervisor signature/date \_\_\_\_\_

**SMART goals worksheet**

This is an optional tool to assist with goal writing. Use the process for each of the 1-3 goals you are considering.

**S – STRATEGIC AND SPECIFIC**

- Strategic: Select a high-leverage goal that will make a difference.
- Specific: Clearly define what you will do and how you will do it.

**M – MEASURABLE:** Establish concrete criteria for tracking progress and determining success.

**A – ATTAINABLE:** Select a goal you have a reasonable expectation of achieving (a “stretch” goal that is not easy, but doable).

**R – RESULTS-BASED:** Clearly define the results you expect to see.

**T – TIME-BOUND:** Establish a starting and ending date for completion of the goal.

**LEADERSHIP GOAL**

<b>R:</b> What <b>result</b> do you hope to achieve? Be specific.	<b>S:</b> What <b>specific</b> leadership action(s) might lead to the desired result? Describe what you will do and how you will do it.	<b>A:</b> What is the likelihood you will <b>achieve</b> the goal upon successful completion of the actions described? Show the connection between your actions and the desired result.	<b>M:</b> What <b>measures</b> (criteria) will you use to determine progress and document the effect of chosen indicators?	<b>T:</b> What is the <b>time frame</b> for completing the goal? List start date, review date(s) and end date.

**Final leadership goal statement:** (Combine considerations in all columns to create your goal statement. Transfer this to the first page of the plan.)

<b>R:</b> What <b>result</b> do you hope to achieve? Be specific.	<b>S:</b> What <b>specific</b> leadership action(s) might lead to the desired result? Describe what you will do and how you will do it.	<b>A:</b> What is the likelihood you will <b>achieve</b> the goal upon successful completion of the actions described? Show the connection between your actions and the desired result.	<b>M:</b> What <b>measures</b> (criteria) will you use to determine progress and document the effect of chosen indicators?	<b>T:</b> What is the <b>time frame</b> for completing the goal? List start date, review date(s) and end date.

**Final learning goal statement:** (Combine considerations in all columns to create your goal statement. Transfer this to the first page of the plan.)



## Learning plan keeps superintendent on course

*Continued from p. 1*

including working more closely with his board and resource people. Using an SAI template (see tool pp. 4-5), he identified indicators of progress, set start and end dates for each goal, and specified when he would review his progress.

### IOWA AHEAD IN INTEGRATING EFFORTS

In 2007, Iowa began requiring that administrators be evaluated each year around individual professional learning plans and demonstrate competency on six Iowa Standards for School Leaders (see box). Boards use the standards to evaluate superintendents, and superintendents use them in evaluating school leaders. Intermediate service agencies use leadership standards and evidence from administrators' individual learning plans that link to school and district improvement goals to reaccredit districts.

Linking the learning plans to evaluation and requiring that principals, too, be evaluated are particularly noteworthy steps, according to a forthcoming study by RAND Education, since most principals are infrequently evaluated. The study, which will be made available at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org), says Iowa is developing an advanced leadership system, connecting state and district policies to integrate leadership improvements into a broad change agenda.

Iowa's efforts, according to the report, show that states and districts can improve leadership — and potentially then student achievement — through a cohesive system.

Business has long touted the benefits of individual learning plans for leaders to identify a direction, set goals, and examine the means to achieve those goals. For example, the Corporate Leadership Council, an association of executives, published a study in 2001 of key development strategies for leaders. A summary of results from 8,000 corporate leaders in six industries in eight countries found the second most highly-rated factor was an individual development plan.

### NSDC'S BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

Plans help individuals develop the skills to lead and also force leaders to focus on areas for growth, said Troyce Fisher, leadership grant director for the School Administrators of Iowa. They are “a contract between the leader and the organization for what the future should hold,” she said.

Forest City (Iowa) Schools Superintendent Darwin Lehman likened the individual plan to a family budget, a tool that helps one set priorities and measure how day-to-day reality stacks up, then align or adjust as needed.

“It keeps me focused on opportunities for learning,” Lehman said. “It gives me a chance to share with my board the areas I’m working on. If the board sees something else, it could lead to different areas for growth. It’s an opportunity to

have dialogue around a structure.”

### PLANS YIELD MULTIPLE BENEFITS

Accountability through leadership standards and individual learning plans is a primary piece of a statewide system of pressure points.

“When leaders are sufficiently aware of how to build skills in areas most needed in the district, that’s one leverage point,” Fisher said. “We don’t stop there. Superintendents and principals can’t work in dysfunctional systems. School boards have to guide policies to practices that support healthy systems. That’s our spin on how to make this a cohesive solution.”

Narak said he uses his individual learning plan as a communication piece, sharing it with staff, the board, and the community. “The superintendent cannot do the heavy lifting in the district in what needs to be done to improve student achievement,” he said. “I provide the vision and where we need to go. The plan lets everyone who works with me understand where I’m coming from.”

That understanding can be essential at evaluation time, Fisher said. Using the learning plan, artifacts, and tying the leader’s work to standards allows for a more robust conversation between lay members of the school board and education professionals, she said, rather than a Likert scale,

*Continued on p. 7*

For a digital library of publications on education leadership, visit the online Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)

## Iowa Standards for School Leaders

- **Standard #1:** An educational leader promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. (*Shared Vision*)
- **Standard #2:** An educational leader promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development. (*Culture of Learning*)
- **Standard #3:** An educational leader promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. (*Management*)
- **Standard #4:** An educational leader promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. (*Family and Community*)
- **Standard #5:** An educational leader promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. (*Ethics*)
- **Standard #6:** An educational leader promotes the success of all students by understanding the profile of the community and responding to and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural context. (*Societal Context*)

**Source:** <http://iowaschoolleadership.org/pdf/standardsandcriteria.pdf>

*Continued from p. 6*

check-off evaluation. In fact, an SAI committee of leaders and others developed a list of “artifacts,” examples of work, that superintendents can use to demonstrate to their board their competencies in the areas outlined in the standards and demonstrate how they are meeting their personal goals.

### STATE SUSTAINS, SUPPORTS LEADERS

The school administrators association has focused on several complementary areas in developing leadership skills, including:

- Mentoring and induction programs for beginning administrators.
- A Principals Academy which has had more than 350 principals participate in a three-day summer experience focusing on their leadership role, with follow-up in November and June. Principals spend time writing individual professional learning plans, emphasizing making those plans robust and tied to student achievement, said Fisher.
- A superintendents’ network that takes a more system approach, using the Harvard model of instructional rounds, similar to the medical model used in teaching hospitals. Nearly 120 of about 350 of the state’s superintendents participate in the network.

- Considering a new model for central office to more effectively support principals and create higher student achievement by identifying specific functions for those staff and creating an aligned evaluation.

The emphasis on sustaining and developing leaders is important, Fisher said. “A growing body of research is providing evidence of leaders’ effect on student achievement,” she said, “and the need for quality professional development is more apparent than ever.” Indeed, research has shown that school leadership is second only to teachers’ classroom instruction for affecting student learning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Narak said individual learning plans help district leaders model professional learning for site-based leaders, from principals to teachers.

“We each need to take ownership, especially as leaders, if we expect teachers to do so,” he said. “It’s all about accountability and being results-based.”

Narak said a seismic cultural shift is needed for leaders to hold themselves accountable for measurable results.

“The professional learning plan is a way you can really measure and show you’ve accomplished what you set out to do,” he said. ■

**For more information on the School Administrators of Iowa’s work, see <http://iowaschoolleadership.org/>.**

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## ARRA + professional development = school results

**F**ederal stimulus funds offer an unprecedented opportunity for large-scale reform to U.S. schools.

Each U.S. Department of Education document describing how states and school districts should consider using stimulus funds has highlighted improvements in the quality and results of professional development as a crucial component of reform.

NSDC recommends that states and districts consider the following high-leverage strategies when deciding how to make use of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 funds.

- Provide a coaches academy to increase impact of instructional coaching.
- Transform a school into an authentic collaborative learning community.
- Produce and implement an effective school improvement plan.
- Develop the long-term capacity of central office to produce



### Use these strategies to make the most of federal stimulus funds

- substantive school improvement.
  - Invest in interpersonal skill development and coaching for school leaders.
- NSDC encourages you to assess your plans for your stimulus-funded actions against these strategies and outcomes. NSDC stands ready to partner with states and districts in advancing professional development that improves staff and student performance. More information on each of these important and powerful learning strategies is available online at [www.nsdcc.org/arrareresults/](http://www.nsdcc.org/arrareresults/).