By Troyce Fisher

Developing cohesive leadership means addressing all parts of the system

Photo by ANNA MOSER/Anna Moser Photography

Troyce Fisher and colleagues have learned a number of lessons as they have worked to create leadership cohesion in Iowa.

I n my role with the School Administrators of Iowa leading Iowa's leadership grant from The Wallace Foundation, I work with a coalition of individuals and groups striving to implement a cohesive leadership system for school leaders. Efforts to create a cohesive leadership system in Iowa for the past nine years have resulted in:

- Establishing leadership standards and criteria against which every administrator is to be evaluated;
- Modeling evaluation resource guides to ensure that the process is rooted in best practice;
- Redesigning leadership preparation programs in all our universities;
- Trainings for administrators through leadership academies;
- A required mentoring and induction program for new administrators;
- Strengthening leadership work delivered through the intermediate service agencies;
- Redesigning the role of central office leaders to more clearly align with the work of the building principal;
- Instituting a School Administration Manager (SAM) program to help principals focus their use of time on improving instruction; and
- Developing supportive policies and other conditions that ensure the work will go on.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE LESSONS WE'VE LEARNED:

Having a moral purpose trumps turf: From the beginning, our mantra was that "every learner in every building in every district in every part of Iowa deserves quality leadership." We made the link between leadership and learning, from the board table to the classroom, from policy at the state level to practices that freed principals' time to be in the classroom promoting high levels of learning, and from what we did as a guiding coalition to what our chances were that every student would be a successful learner, earner, and citizen. We started most of our meetings with the question, "What good has been done for the children in your sphere of influence lately?" We kept kids' needs at the center. We had few turf battles, and I think that's a major reason why.

You can't beat a solid theory of action: Wallace's theory of action states: When leaders' behaviors are grounded in standards of best practice and leaders are supported by quality training that increases their skills to meet those standards and conditions at the local, regional, and state levels support leaders' abilities to focus on creating learning systems, then student achievement increases. All of our efforts and initiatives development were filtered through that theory.

Relationships matter … a lot: We worked hard to create a climate and culture of transparency, honesty, and collaboration with everyone involved. Honoring others' expertise, being willing to look at issues from multiple perspectives in individual and group settings, and letting go of ego went a long way towards building a climate of trust and a culture of results. Without respectful relationships, this work would not have progressed very far. We used our respect for one another to engage in tough conversations because we trusted each other. The soft skill of paying attention to relationships provided human capital to sustain the work in difficult times.

Sometimes you just have to step up to the plate: Our chief state school officer took the bold step of requiring each of Iowa's preparation programs to redesign their programs to more closely align with the Iowa Leadership Standards and to provide evidence that they were preparing a different kind of leader with much more emphasis on improving student achievement. If the programs did not meet expectations as determined by a neutral review panel, they would cease to exist. This was not politically popular and met with significant resistance, but it worked. Programs were revised. Some institutions withdrew their programs from consideration. Those that remain are much more focused on creating leaders whose primary focus is increasing learning for all.

It's better to have a hand in the doing than to be done to: From the beginning, we said a core value of ours was to involve as many practitioners and those impacted by this work as possible. We've had hundreds of different people serve on project task forces, committees, and design teams. The products and processes they designed were useful, enjoyed large buy-in from their colleagues, and were grounded in best practice. Iowa's school leaders wanted to be involved in creating a new culture for their profession and responded with enthusiasm to our invitations to participate.

Never underestimate the power of adult learning theory: We structure our meetings to include overt intended outcomes; intentional use of protocols and multiple groupings; and specific attention to what decisions have been made, who is responsible, and by what deadline the work will be done. We share reminders about norms for our learning community. These norms address sidebar conversations, multitasking, and other behaviors that can undermine the productivity of meetings. We know this sends a message about the importance of the work and how we value others' time.

It's who you know — and leadership matters: We assembled a 14-organization coalition from the beginning that we called the Leadership Partnership to guide the accomplishment of our action plan and scope of work. It has representatives from the major groups that have a stake in ensuring that quality leadership exists in every district and that state policies and conditions support their work. Besides the state board of education, the department of education, intermediate services agencies, and local leaders,

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we also have all the professional education associations, the Iowa Business Council, a group dedicated to meaningful parent involvement, and representatives from state government.

The comprehensiveness of the work meant assigning responsibility for each of the various components to appropriate individuals, who then assembled task forces and committees to inform the work and who ultimately had responsibility for making sure the work got done. We chose respected recently retired educators, current professional association employees, and experts in professional development to do the work.

Having the political cachet of a major foundation funding us was a huge plus. The Wallace Foundation's decade of commitment to this goal and the Iowa Department of Education's wisdom in subcontracting the work to the professional association for school administrators combined to lend great credibility to our efforts. Involving key policy makers all along the way is key.

There's nothing as practical as good theory: The Wallace

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Foundation supported our work in innumerable ways. Because of the findings from the research they commissioned, the support of the national coalition of partners they assembled, the ongoing professional development we were given, and the networks of grantees they fostered, we were able to apply the best research to our efforts.

The key word is system: Developing a cohesive leadership system means addressing all parts of the system. The comprehensiveness of our work was overwhelming at times, but without paying attention to how all the facets impacted each other, we wouldn't have realized the levels of success we have to date. Having standards requires aligning evaluation systems to those standards and training people in how to coach and evaluate against those standards. Revising preparation programs means having cohesive mentoring and induction programs in place once those aspiring leaders land jobs. Robust training through leadership academies requires coordination between higher education, intermediate service agencies, and professional associations. Polices at the state and local level must be enacted that reinforce best practices. Changing only one part of the system while not addressing all of the others that impact the work would be wasted energy.

There's no there there: This is a process, and we're not there yet. In fact, we doubt that we ever will be. The more we accomplish, the more we see there is to accomplish. Iowa's school leaders have their biggest challenge ahead as they work to implement the Iowa Core Curriculum, which details learner outcomes for every student. Based on input received from the Leadership Partnership group, we have now launched a public engagement effort to help Iowa's communities understand the magnitude of the changes that need to occur in schooling if our students are to achieve success in the 21st century. From that, some other need will emerge.

LOOKING AHEAD

Despite all the lessons and challenges, we know we are on our way. We've enjoyed progress in improving leadership statewide and a measure of success. We believe we are building a scaffold of supports for leaders in the form of standards, training, and conditions that can equip them to meet the learning needs of every student in Iowa. We won't be content until that's true.

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lection. My goal now is to maintain 75% to 80% of my time on instructional issues. I am hoping soon to see data indicating I have been able to attain at least 80% of my time on instructional tasks. I do not think that all my time can or should be focused on instruction. There will always be management issues that the principal needs to handle. The daily SAM meeting itself is a management task. Yet I know how easy it is to be overwhelmed with those management issues and lose sight of the most important responsibility: how to ensure that each student has the highest quality educational program possible. SAM helps me retain that focus, always.

SCHOOL RESULTS

Fairmeadows is a building with positive student achievement data. Last year, our building student achievement goals were to have 92% of students in grades 3-6 demonstrate proficiency (at least the 40th percentile) on core areas for the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, 95% of students in grades K-6 demonstrate proficiency in reading, and 77% of all students proficient in mathematics on district assessments. These goals represent a 5% increase in proficiency from the previous year. We met these student achievement goals.

I am not naïve enough to think that SAM made this happen. I am privileged to have extremely professional, effective, and dedicated teachers and amazing students at Fairmeadows. The initiatives we continue to refine and implement (instructional decision making and professional learning communities) provide a structure for our community to maintain a focus on improvement of instructional strategies to increase student achievement. I do believe that our implementation of SAM has been a factor in the effectiveness of instructional strategies and the efficient use of data to drive instructional decisions. These are aligned quite closely because the purpose is the same for each of these big initiatives: ensuring the highest quality educational programs for each student at Fairmeadows. Our student achievement goals for this year continue to focus on increasing the proficiency for each student at Fairmeadows.

SAM CHALLENGES

This is nowhere near a perfect world. We struggled with some aspects of SAM as we began our implementation. We are glad to look back on some of those struggles, while other aspects of our implementation continue to be challenges. Right away we