

Collective. Comprehensive. Cohesive. These are the words Gene Wilhoit uses to talk about education reform that involves multiple levels of the education system — states, districts, and schools. Today it is widely accepted that education leadership is crucial to improving student performance, and Wilhoit, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, has persistently called on states to take on a larger role in standards-based reform and to create policy that supports improved leadership.

“Now that there is consensus on the important role education leadership plays in raising student achievement, we must promote policies and activities that build strong leaders at all stages of their careers,” Wilhoit said in a 2008 news release. “Implementing and following a set of guiding policy standards is the best way to make this happen.”

In this conversation with JSD, Wilhoit lays out his views on the alignment of the three levels of the system to create the kind of leadership that can lead to real reform and improved student learning. — VF



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STATE POLICY IS KEY TO BUILDING STRONG LEADERS

Education leader Gene Wilhoit calls on states and districts to work together to develop policies that support improved leadership

As told to Valerie von Frank

We're moving to a higher level of education in this country, and we need innovation. If we don't make dramatic shifts, we're not going to be able to reach our goal that every child graduate with the skills and knowledge to be successful, to be able to go on to higher education without remediation or move into a successful career. That's what society has said to us as educators needs to happen.

We've never had that mandate before. Before this, there was an unwritten code that some kids could not be successful, and we could get by with it. There were avenues in this society for those who didn't get an education to earn a living. The United States of America is now operating in a dynamic global economy and social context, and we need every youngster to be able to move into a successful, rewarding career for his or her own benefit and also for societal benefit. If that's our goal,

we have to have different mechanisms, structures, and assumptions in place about how we're educating children that will get every one to graduate, not just 70% on average.

We have established a system of delivering education under a different cultural and economic environment and with a set of different resources and expectations, and today we are trying to improve that system.

What we have to do is to step back from that system and be willing to challenge some of the basic assumptions about this thing we call schooling, because as long as we assume that everything we have in place right now — all the conditions, all the rules, all the relationships we have right now — is going to get us to our goal, we are going to fail. We have some major issues in public education that are systemic and will have to be taken on.

LEADERSHIP IS CRITICAL

If we expect to get all children to high levels of learning, we have to have highly effective leaders in every

school, and we must have a high-functioning district office to support the educational program in schools. That's a broad agenda.

The Wallace Foundation has had a 10-year commitment to strengthen education leadership. Much of the work has focused on a systems approach. This is a new thought process for everyone to link in a much more specific way.

No one piece of the system can be poorly functioning. Reaching our goal will require rethinking and adjusting and aligning three elements — school, district, and state — in a coordinated effort that produces high quality and coordinated conversations between the states. Each level has a critical role. You cannot succeed with a weak district office and high-functioning principals; you can't have weak principals and a highly functioning district office; and you can't have effective principals and districts and have systemwide change without a state context that sets policies in place and makes sure all parts of the system are operating effectively.

THE STATES' ROLE

I want states to develop a comprehensive program to identify, prepare, and support administrators. Support for leaders has to be a state policy, as opposed to individual institutional capacity.

Currently, leadership preparation is an overlooked phenomenon in state policy. We have paid more attention to developing teachers than leaders. We have a patchwork of leadership programs, too many of which are poorly designed, are not developed with the cooperation of school systems, and are not held to rigorous standards.

Gene Wilhoit

Gene Wilhoit became executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers in 2006.

He began his career as a social studies teacher in Ohio and Indiana. He served as a program director in the Indiana Department of Education, an administrator in Kanawha County, W.Va., and a special assistant in the U.S. Department of Education before serving as executive director of the National Association of State Boards of Education from 1986 to 1993.

From 1994 to 2006, Wilhoit was director of the Arkansas Department of Education and deputy commissioner and commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Education. In those positions, he shepherded finance reform, led equity initiatives, designed and implemented assessment and accountability systems, advanced nationally recognized preschool and technology programs, and reorganized state agencies to focus on service and support.

Wilhoit has a bachelor of arts degree in history and economics from Georgetown College and a master's in teaching, political science, and economics from Indiana University Bloomington.

He is a member of numerous education organizations, has served on national and state commissions, and has written and spoken on a variety of education issues.

Currently, leadership preparation is an overlooked phenomenon in state policy. We have paid more attention to developing teachers than leaders.

In addition, we do not have the kind of comprehensive, statewide support systems needed for leaders once they assume their roles, both in terms of immersion into the role and in terms of ongoing professional support.

Some states have stepped back and made dramatic shifts in the ways they organize their overall support system. Delaware and Iowa have done an outstanding job of redesigning their support systems to provide different ways of approaching state support. (See the RAND research study at www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter.)

The first step for states is to look at the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards, an agreed-upon set of competencies and practices that need to be undertaken by an effective leader. Those standards ought to become a central point for designing leader preparation programs. States ought to begin to send strong messages about critical attributes we want in leaders and be very specific.

Next, I would expect that states ask their preparation programs, in order to be accredited, to adopt those standards and to show how they are providing experience for principals that lead to high-quality practices.

Third, state accrediting boards should look at their requirements for licensing to make sure the requirements are in line with these standards. I would expect the state to revise licensing standards to make sure leaders exhibit agreed-upon competencies.

In many cases, we've used fairly weak measures to determine who is licensed. We don't expect beginning principals to be masters, but we do expect them to have certain competencies, and you have to have multiple ways for people to demonstrate those. Many states don't have those kinds of measures in place.

I would ask preparation programs to establish a partnership of governance between those institutions preparing leaders and K-12 districts responsible for hiring and bringing them along professionally. I'm not sure many states have a systematic professional growth program for most principals. Generally, I would describe professional growth for principals as a potpourri of opportunities in which an individual in isolation may participate, and these options often are disjointed and short-term. I would shift that practice to a required professional development plan jointly determined by the leader and the district around a set of principles of quality practice and supported through embedded learning at the school site. Job-embedded learning will require master leaders to coach and mentor other leaders. It will require states to provide resources. Those five to six shifts would make a major difference in state practice.

DISTRICTS' ROLE

State systems need to be there for support. The second element for change is a different vision of what a good leader is, with a particular emphasis on the roles that need to be played at the district and building levels.

The district is the central point for making sure every school has a highly effective principal. The district is responsible for identifying potential leaders, establishing a network of learning for those individuals, and helping those individuals develop a professional plan that takes them into a leadership track. Central office staff need to be organized to support those building-level leaders. The district office needs to have a coaching/mentoring relationship with the principal, to provide adequate resources where concerns are surfacing, and to be a support as that principal grows. The district identifies strong mentor leaders to work on a regular, ongoing basis with principals. The district also organizes principals to ensure a constant dialogue between the buildings and district office about how they support each other.

P-16 councils are emerging in a lot of states, or P-20 councils — states have different titles for them. These councils are organized at the state level to bring the various systems pieces together — the higher education community with the pre-K-12 community with licensing boards, standards boards, and other entities interested in improvement, and they come together for a coherent whole. I have seen these councils' effectiveness in Kentucky, where leaders took the state-level conversation, which can only set a policy context, and moved it down to regional councils, where specific community and technical colleges and specific higher education institutions met with specific school districts. Then you have policy setting and an overall design coming out of the state, but all that comes to life at the local level. When you have regional councils and a strong commitment to work together, you can see remarkable changes in the design of leadership preparation programs, the way the districts act toward their leaders, and in policies. And what is really exciting to see is that these entities no longer see themselves in isolation from each other.

BUILDINGS' ROLE

At the building level, we may have a job (of principal) that's not doable, a matter of the greatest concern right now. We have to look at what it takes to be a strong leader in schools. The first shift in thinking is making sure we define that role as a person or teams of people who are educational leaders. It is not sufficient any longer to expect that a good building manager is going to be able to bring about the kinds of changes we need in this country.

We need a serious investigation of what changes in functions need to occur in school buildings. Jefferson County, Kentucky, and now 11 states have created new positions called School Administrative Managers, people who carry out the management functions and free the principal to carry out the central business of the school — educating children and supporting teachers.

Lots of people in the system now are frustrated. The very thought of being able to do something differently, an opportunity for change, just raising ideas and possibilities has generated a lot of excitement.

That points us right back to the system. People are willing to take on the challenge, they're willing to go for higher results, but they are concerned about the conditions that inhibit that. They want strong professional development, they want time with each other to make changes, they want states to allow them to try new things, they want states to begin to question practices around fund-

Resources

The Council of Chief State School Officers released a revised set of education leadership standards in 2008. These revised standards, based on 1996 standards by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, were developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, a steering committee of 10 membership organizations that represents state policy makers, school leaders, professors of education, and other scholars, with support from The Wallace Foundation.

The ISLLC standards guide leadership policy and practice at the state level. A database of research and other sources of information supporting the six standards is available online at www.ccsso.org/ISLLC2008Research.

The Wallace Foundation web site, www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter, offers reports and information about education leadership issues.

ing resources, around how they get educational credit, around how they can organize student learning. They want more resources, greater assistance in diagnosing student learning problems, and outside support. To become stronger leaders, they cannot see themselves operating in isolation without a strong support base.

About the council

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The council seeks members' consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

POSITIVE CHANGES

I've seen some real changes occurring in some states. Conversations between universities and pre-K-12 systems have resulted in higher-quality preparation programs. In Kentucky, for example, almost across the state you can see districtwide and regional mentor and training programs. Almost all the large districts now have some mechanism in place for tapping individuals with leadership potential and bringing them along and helping them with the work. Many programs are now being aligned within the state. Academies are being shared between and among districts. The state department of education is providing resources for those academies. Superintendents have begun supporting each other, starting with a small nucleus but now organized regionally so superintendents mentor superintendents and offer organized learning opportunities for those at various levels. Most states have begun collecting better data to inform decision making and changes in the system. Behind that data collection is a state network of support for schools that are struggling, and the best-case scenario is the district is the frontline intervention, but there are cooperative agreements across the state among school boards, superintendents, and departments of education to help these struggling schools. So networks exist that weren't in place 10 years ago. There are different levels of conversation and alignment now, and not so much territorialism.

What we're looking for now as a nation is a high level of learning for every student. It may take more time; it may take different experiences; it may take different resources, but it's a very different system than what we have in place right now. But we either give up on the goal of success for all kids or we change the system. We've decided here (at CCSSO) that the system has to be challenged. That's a big leap for a lot of people, and we have to think deliberately about how we get from one place to another. The alternative is we drop out kids or graduate them without knowledge. We're doing that now.

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