

# THE LEARNING Principal

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## Fall 2010

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

## Taking action on equity

By Anthony Armstrong

*“The only way to achieve equity in society is to achieve equity in the classroom... The fight for a quality education is about so much more than education. This is a daily fight for social justice. No other issue offers the same promise of equality as education. No other issue can end the cycle of poverty — teenage pregnancy — the prison pipeline — and the social sickness plaguing broken communities.”*

— Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan

**M**any school leaders across the nation are re-evaluating what it means to achieve equity in education after a recent study by the Schott Foundation (2010) reported the graduation rate of black males in the U.S. averaged 47%, with three states graduating less than 30% of their black male students. This parallels other recent studies that show minorities have close to a 50/50 chance of earning a diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006; Swanson, 2004).

While the report has drawn attention to race inequities, many schools across the nation have discovered that equity involves much more than race, and there is much more than graduation rates at stake. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan (2010) recently framed student equity as a matter of social justice. Cultural, social, psychological and gender inequities

### Tools for equity

Use the self-evaluation rubric on pp. 6-7 to monitor your school or district's progress.



lead to negative learning environments in schools, depression, alcohol and drug abuse, suicides, and a continuation of the poverty cycle (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008).

For Rob Larson, director of the Oregon Leadership Network, the search for equity in schools is one of the primary motivators for principals to lead and can be both a rewarding and demanding undertaking. “The essence of school improvement is to change the school setting and climate to eliminate performance gaps in student achievement among race, ethnic, linguistic, economic status, or gender subgroups,” said Larson.

### DEFINING EQUITY

With so much hanging in the balance, clearly defin-

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is ...

learningforward

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We are an *international association of learning educators* committed to advancing professional learning for student success.

[www.learningforward.org](http://www.learningforward.org)



## Just how forward thinking are you?

**A**re you a forward thinker with an eye on the future, or do you find your perspective engaged in a long-term relationship with the past? Your answer to that question is bigger than you, because, as a leader, your view of the future plays a pivotal role in the types of learning opportunities those around you may experience. I like to

think of myself as a forward thinker, but at times I have my doubts.

For example, I remember my first cellular phone. It was as big as a breadbasket, had two screw-on antennae, and came with a 20 minutes-per-month calling plan. Since it was only for emergencies, I never imagined I would use all those minutes. At that time, I simply couldn't envision a world where the entire web is at

our fingertips. Most of us saw the cell phone as simply an extension of our landline phones. We assumed we would only use it to do what we had always done — talk. This limited view of cell phones was defined by our past relationship with telephones.

Similarly, our struggle as educators is to reimagine what the future of

learning looks like without limiting our vision to past perspectives. This struggle is significant in defining our sector's present and possible future.

Many of us have heard this idea: Bring a doctor from 1909 into one of today's medical facilities and she would have little sense of what to do, but bring a teacher from the same time period into one of today's classrooms and she would simply pick up the chalk and start teaching. The entire industry of schooling is so locked into our current structures that it's hard to imagine how "disruptive innovation" could ever occur from within. Even some of our most innovative brick-and-mortar charter schools are indistinguishable from their traditional counterparts. Interactive white boards replace chalkboards, PowerPoint slides replace overhead transparencies, copies replace dittos, and lectures take place in front of students grouped at tables instead of organized in rows. However, the fundamental ways we visualize learning have not changed much. Even the push to teach 21st-century skills is only starting to pick up steam some 10 years into the "new" century.

As I struggle with this issue of forward thinking (or dare I say, thinking forward) and envisioning the future of learning for children and adults, I am inspired by the organization formerly known as the National Staff Development Council. NSDC, now Learning Forward, recognized a name change was both a symbolic and very real way to take control of a piece of our

sector's future. But a name change is not enough. How we as a community of learners re-imagine *learning* for students and the adults who support them will ultimately determine whether or not Learning Forward is truly looking, thinking, and learning forward.

To determine what type of forward thinker you are, examine your current views of the future and how they are tied to past perspectives: Do you look beyond the important, yet limiting, notion of improving schools or grapple with the broader issue of improving learning? Do you see existing technology as the answer or do you imagine learning environments for which the technology doesn't yet exist? Do you immediately consider what's needed to develop the capacity of adults who will support new learning environments? I have posed many questions and offered few answers —many of those answers we will discover together.

I challenge Learning Forward and our extended learning community to free our minds as we consider a world of possibilities beyond the structures that currently define our sector. How will we know we have finally arrived at this future that will redefine education? The forward thinkers among us know we never will ... and that's exactly how it should be!

•  
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**Envision the future of learning for children and adults.**



## Leadership practices that make a difference

### Learning From Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning

Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla L. Wahlstrom, Stephen E. Anderson, July 2010. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement/ University of Minnesota and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/ University of Toronto. Commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. Available at [www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Pages/learning-from-leadership-investigating-the-links-to-improved-student-learning.aspx](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Pages/learning-from-leadership-investigating-the-links-to-improved-student-learning.aspx).

### OVERVIEW

With widespread agreement among educators, researchers, and policymakers about the importance of school leadership, the Wallace Foundation funded a six-year study to examine the leadership practices and policies that affect student learning. Each of the three major sections of the study focuses on practices at one level of leadership – school, district, and state. This summary focuses particularly on the school-level findings and implications. See the fall issue of *The Learning System* to read district-level implications.

### STUDY APPROACH

Researchers used both qualitative and quantitative research approaches to collect data in nine states, 43 districts, and 180 schools at all levels over the six years of the study. They interviewed a range of stakeholders, including

legislators, state agency employees, district leaders and board members, and teachers and school administrators. The research team conducted a number of surveys, observed classrooms, and examined student achievement data from high-stakes state tests.

### Selected findings

- Collective leadership, that is, leadership coming from a network of sources, has more influence on student achievement than individual leadership.
- Principals affect student achievement primarily through their influence on teacher motivation and working conditions.
- Shared leadership and instructional leadership have an indirect impact on student achievement because of the role they play in creating the conditions and structures that support professional learning communities.
- Middle and high school principals face particular challenges and require specific support designed for their unique contexts.
- Teachers and principals agree that the most helpful leadership behaviors for instructional improvement include: focusing the school on student achievement goals; monitoring professional learning needs; and providing resources and support for teacher collaboration.

### Implications for school leaders

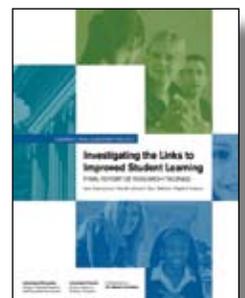
- Broaden stakeholder involvement in decision making.

### Exploring the research base

Find syntheses of research studies that have implications for professional learning beginning with the fall issues of *The Learning Principal* and *The Learning System*. The newsletters will explore both current and seminal works. The syntheses are not necessarily comprehensive; rather descriptions are selective to serve the specific interests of newsletter readers.

To learn more about the research base that informs effective professional learning, search the evidence database on the Learning Forward web site ([www.learningforward.org/evidence/](http://www.learningforward.org/evidence/)).

- Interact with teachers to promote motivation and create conditions that promote teacher collaboration, recognizing that these factors are important in improving student achievement.
- Take an active, direct role in exploring instructional practices in community with teachers.
- Create a schoolwide focus on specific expectations and goals for students.
- Visit classrooms frequently and provide constant feedback to teachers on instruction.
- Provide deliberate support for teachers' learning needs and create time and structures for collaborative professional learning.



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ing equity becomes a critical endeavor. For Larson, equity means giving each student the tools needed to be successful, keeping in mind that each student will have his or her own needs to achieve success. “Equity is intentionally assigning resources to the students with the highest needs,” said Larson.

Steve Day, principal for the Beaverton Health and Science School in Beaverton, Ore., sees the goal of equity as an equitable end result. “Equity does not mean equality,”

said Day, whose high school has only had one dropout in the last three years. “It’s not just a matter of equal resources. Equitable outcomes mean each student has the same range of choices as other students when they leave our system, up through college, regardless of their background.” Day notes that the

income disparity between high school and college graduates indicates that high school graduation is no longer an equitable outcome.

In addition to giving students the tools they need to have equal opportunities and access, equity also requires re-evaluating how we value natural and socially constructed differences, said Rona Wilensky, former principal for New Vista High School in Boulder, Colo. “Race is a biological fact, and sexual orientation is a biological fact, but the fact that some people have privilege and others do not have privilege is a socially constructed fact. Our first job is to recognize that this hierarchy exists. Our second job is to work to change that hierarchy and create greater access to opportunities. Greater equality, but not with the goal of eliminating differences; instead, we need to eliminate the hierarchical valuing of difference.”

**Learning Forward  
BELIEF**

Remarkable professional learning begins with ambitious goals for students.

**For Rona Wilensky, who built her school’s equity-focused professional development program from scratch, a principal focused on equity is much different than one who is not focused on equity:**

“You have to start thinking about things differently. You have to plan for every kid and how every kid will feel, what the ramifications are for your decisions. Equity has to become a lens through which you look at everything. Is this going to exclude families? Is this going to reinforce differential opportunities for kids? For example, if we have an Olympics, what about the kids with physical limitations? When you do thorough equity work in a school, everyone is thinking of these things and they start to realize that in a society with unequal dimensions, elements of oppression lurk everywhere.”

**HOW DOES EQUITY TRANSLATE INTO PRACTICE?**

Before Wilensky began to plan her school’s equity-focused professional development program, she obtained permission from the whole staff. “It is important that everyone take ownership of achieving equity,” she said. “This is the most important lesson I took from the process.”

New Vista’s initial professional development examined how advisors were serving students from marginalized and underachieving groups. A committee presented staff with a recommendation to offer an ESL program and plans for offering professional learning in sheltered instruction and cultural competency. The plan also called for bringing equity education to the entire student body so that it was not just the adults who knew what it meant to create a welcoming environment.

“The development of new approaches to teaching and curriculum and the development of staff and student cultural competency were woven together into our daily lives,” said Wilensky. “Sometimes we only engaged in adult learning, as when we studied racial identity development and wrote our own racial autobiographies. But even when we were preparing teachers to lead equity activities with students, we devoted time to staff learning. The common pattern was for staff to engage in the activity that was planned for students, glean their own learning from it, debrief it in terms of both that learning and how best to facilitate the student activity, conduct the student activity, and finally engage in debriefing those results.”

Wilensky involved her local community and students heavily in the equity program, including having a panel of transgender community members speak to the adults on her staff, and a separate panel of transgender youth who spoke about their experiences to students.

Day also used a combination of methods to integrate equity into professional development, including creating an equity team that brought various exercises into staff meetings, such as looking at raw data, and hosting a retreat with conversations about race and the role of race in education. On a curricular level, the teachers created ninth grade science, social studies, and humanities units that studied the fallacies of race and their implications.

Additionally, Day has focused on diversity in the school’s staff recruiting efforts. “It’s not a magic bullet,” said Day, “but it is good for students to see themselves mirrored in the staff.”

**CHALLENGES IN EQUITY**

Day sees an ongoing challenge in overcoming the idea that inequity is insurmountable. “It can be psychologically difficult to maintain focus,” said Day, who finds his inspiration by looking at data, such as how many students go on to

*Continued on p. 5*

**EQUITY IN ACTION**

Below are some immediate actions you can take to help build equity in your school.

- Commit to taking an honest and hard look at the data.
- Encourage voices from staff who are willing to step up and speak out.
- Make a list of things you cannot solve or change, acknowledge them, and then look at what CAN change.

For examples of activities and plans that have worked for Oregon school districts, see *Learning from leaders: Reflections on a decade of progress* (2010, August), a collection of letters from school systems to the Oregon Leadership Network, available at <http://oln.educationnorthwest.org/resource/223>.



*Continued from p. 4*

college. “We are trying to create a place where the identity assumption is ‘Yes, I can be a successful college student.’ This doesn’t happen through textbooks and bell schedules; it happens through the relationships between staff and students, staff and staff, and students and students.”

For Wilensky, the biggest mistake people make is assuming that a workshop is all they need to offer. Instead, she advocates a recurring commitment to equity each year as well as ongoing, job-embedded professional development. “This is something that you have to commit to each year,” said Wilensky.

Honest re-evaluation of current processes is another challenge for many educators and administrators, said Larson. Years of well-intentioned school improvement processes have not helped students in the system be successful, and that’s difficult to admit. “People have to change, and educators need to develop a set of skills to take on a task that we have not yet been successful with,” he said. “When you put that into the context of the normal expectations put on school administrators, that is a huge, enormous task.”

Other types of challenges may lie outside of the district, cautions Larson, such as pushback from the legislature and communities. Larson encourages others to be strong in the face of adversity, though. “It is unacceptable to have outcomes that risk a third of our students because we are not effective at addressing their needs. Inequity is very much a problem of adults — not of students.”

**HAVE COURAGE TO TAKE ACTION**

Larson recommends distributed leadership and collaboration in analyzing the causes of disproportion. “When you start to have honest conversations, you realize that we have all been part of the problem and it is a difficult thing to do. I think, in general, we are hesitant about this topic because it means that we have to rethink the way we’ve been doing things.”

Most important in addressing matters of equity, said Larson, is the courage to take action: “If someone is in

a board meeting and they hear a derogatory comment towards a certain group, then we need to have the courage to speak up in the boardroom. We need school and district leaders with the courage and skill to stand and say, ‘It’s time to align good intentions with effective leadership skill and productive action on behalf of each student in our education system.’”

For specific actions to help build equity in your school, see the Equity in Action box above.

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# Ensure effective district and school leadership

## Self-evaluation rubric

**Directions:** School leadership teams should complete this self-evaluation rubric individually and then, in groups, compare their perceptions and discuss the appropriate next steps.

| What is my school or district's progress?  | BEGINNING                |                     |                          | EMBEDDING                              |   |   | SUSTAINING  |   |   |
|--|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | No action has been taken | Efforts are limited | Results are being gained | Efforts and results are being enhanced |   |   | Practices are widespread, policies are in place, and results are increasing |   |   |
| Does my school or district ...   | 1                        | 2                   | 3                        | 4                                      | 5 | 6 | 7   | 8 | 9 |
| Employ a superintendent and school board that communicate the will and relentless determination needed to ensure success?  |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Demonstrate relentless determination through a clear vision of excellence in policies, newsletters, press releases, news stories, and other forms of communication?      |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Publicize student performance of all required subgroups, even if the information reflects low school or subgroup performance?  |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Have a timeline of measurable achievement goals that reflect the vision of all students achieving proficiency?   |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Regularly monitor progress toward the established goals and publicly report results?   |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Establish accountability measures to ensure that every principal and classroom teacher is evaluated on the basis of student achievement progress toward goal attainment? |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Possess accountability measures that include sanctions for poor performance?   |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Emphasize the importance of using data in all school decision-making?  |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |

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| What is my school or district's progress?  | BEGINNING                |                     |                          | EMBEDDING                              |   |   | SUSTAINING  |   |   |
|--|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | No action has been taken | Efforts are limited | Results are being gained | Efforts and results are being enhanced |   |   | Practices are widespread, policies are in place, and results are increasing |   |   |
| Does my school or district ...   | 1                        | 2                   | 3                        | 4                                      | 5 | 6 | 7   | 8 | 9 |
| Have established policies that prioritize and direct additional funding to the lowest performing students and schools?       |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Use student achievement data to identify ineffective, struggling, or outstanding teachers?                                   |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Ensure that schools with high percentages of impoverished students have experienced, well-trained, and certified teachers?   |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Seek to staff schools attended by a high percentage of impoverished students with a stable, high-quality faculty?            |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Support and provide targeted and embedded professional development for staff members?  |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Possess building principals who reflect the school district's vision that all students achieve proficiency and success?      |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Provide time for teacher collaboration and support for the development and maintenance of professional learning communities? |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |
| Have systemic efforts in place to monitor, evaluate, and sustain progress?   |                          |                     |                          |  |   |   |   |   |   |

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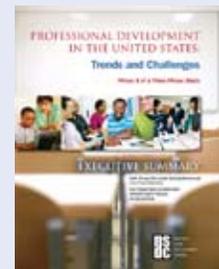
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## Status of teacher learning and collective bargaining reports



Learning Forward's two newest reports reveal the status of teacher learning and how collective bargaining can affect change in state and local policies.

*Professional Development in the United States: Trends and Challenges*, written by a team of researchers from the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, indicates that the nation is making some progress in providing increased support and mentoring for new teachers. However, the study also reveals that teachers' opportunities for the kind of ongoing, intensive professional learning that research shows has a substantial impact on student learning are decreasing.

*Advancing High-Quality Professional Learning Through Collective Bargaining and State Policy*, created in partnership with the American Federation of Teachers, Council of Chief State School Officers, and National Education Association, explores how states and districts can support high-quality professional learning opportunities while calling for more collaboration and a common set of standards for developing policy.

► **Read more and download** *Professional Development in the United States: Trends and Challenges* as a free PDF at [www.learningforward.org/stateproflearning.cfm](http://www.learningforward.org/stateproflearning.cfm).

► **Read more and download** *Advancing High-Quality Professional Learning Through Collective Bargaining and State Policy* as a free PDF at [www.learningforward.org/about/news/NSDC\\_NEA\\_press\\_release\\_8-9-2010.cfm](http://www.learningforward.org/about/news/NSDC_NEA_press_release_8-9-2010.cfm).

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