



Leaders in a learning system

In 2009, Learning Forward released its seminal text, *Becoming a Learning School*, which has guided the school improvement efforts of district and school leaders across the world. The book provides educators with a framework for using professional learning as a key lever for improving the effectiveness of teachers, teacher leaders, principals, central office personnel, and others whose work impacts the learning environments of students. Later this year, the follow-up text, *Becoming a Learning System*, will be released. Our goal in this edition is to explore how systems (school districts, charter management organizations, and networks of traditional and non-traditional schools) can create environments that foster effective teaching and learning in every classroom and every school. In essence, it's about taking learning schools to scale.

Playing a key role in a learning system are school leaders. All of our research in leadership continues to remind us that principals create the conditions for effective teaching and learning that is scaled throughout their buildings and sustained over time. As a recently released Wallace Foundation Perspective (2013) states:

Education research shows that most school variables, considered

separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal.

As a field, we are starting to get a better sense of what it is effective leaders do. For example, our own Leadership standard (Learning Forward, 2011) calls for skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning. In a learning system, however, we also explore the needs of leaders and consider ways we might support their learning. During the Learning Forward Annual Conference in Boston, I delivered a thought leader lecture where I explored the question, "What would a learning system look like from the perspective of a school leader?" I respectfully offer this list of 12 responses to that question.

In a learning system...

1. My district or CMO has a clear picture of what effective teaching and leading look like in practice.
2. My system has strong relationships with the universities that provide our teachers and leaders.
3. My learning is considered just as important as my teachers' and my students'.
4. I have the necessary supports and professional learning at all stages of my career.
5. My supervisor knows my strengths and learning needs.
6. There is a culture of trust throughout my school system.

7. My colleagues and I have a role in working with my district office to create the optimal conditions for teaching and learning.
8. I see a true learning community being modeled in my district office.
9. My district doesn't make me fight for the resources I need to do my job.
10. Our school board has adopted a definition of professional learning.
11. It's my responsibility to identify and support future leaders.
12. I am highly effective in my craft.

As you reflect on the practices of your school district or charter management organization, does true learning permeate the system? Do leaders have the supports they need to significantly improve teaching in learning in their schools? Perhaps the list above doesn't capture all that is needed, but it's my hope that it provides food for thought.

REFERENCES

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Available at www.learningforward.org/standards/leadership.

The Wallace Foundation. (2013, January). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning* (p. 4). New York, NY: Author. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center.

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The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning and other reports on leadership are freely available at The Wallace Foundation Knowledge Center: www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center.