

# TURN EFFECTIVE PRACTICE INTO COMMON PRACTICE

SUCCESSFUL DISTRICTS CREATE SYSTEMS OF LEADERSHIP TALENT DEVELOPMENT

By Richard W. Lemons and Isobel Stevenson

**A**cross the United States, there are schools whose students are significantly outperforming and out-improving those from nearby schools. In almost any geographic location in America, within a 30-minute drive there exist schools where classrooms are alive with stimulating learning, day in and day out.

These are places where students — and adults — are thriving, where we would be thrilled for our own children and grandchildren to attend. And not too far away from these schools are schools that are none of these things. In these schools, where the adults may be working extremely hard, change is elusive, as practices stay consistent and results are stagnant.

One key variable that explains the difference between these two sets of schools is leadership — highly competent principals and teacher leaders who galvanize a culture, align the organization, hold unyielding and high expectations for

children, and develop the necessary professional capacity to serve children and communities exceptionally well.

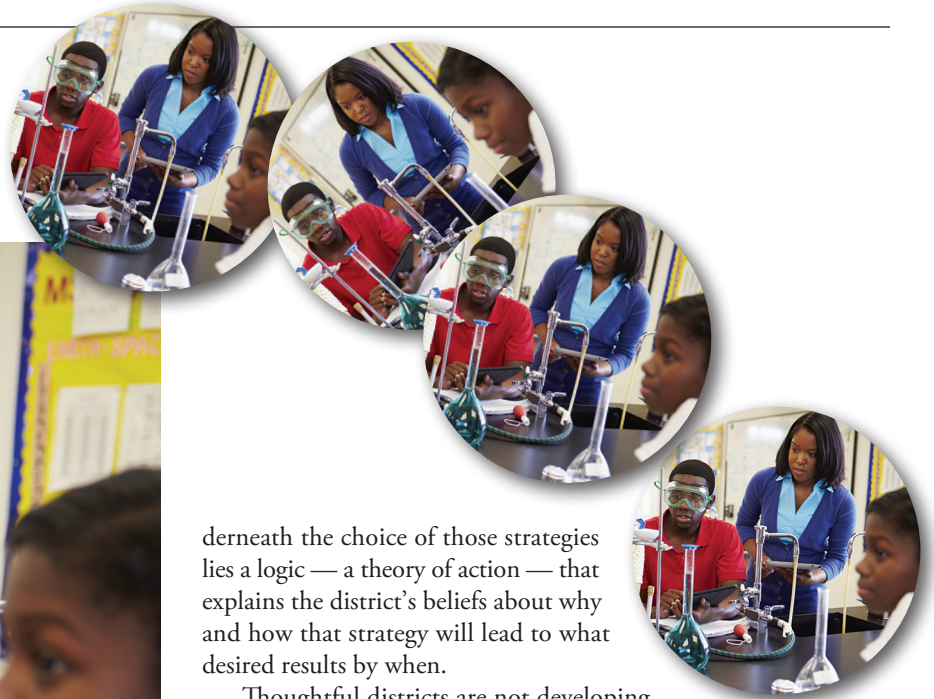
Given what we know about the enormous importance of leaders in improving student learning, it is essential for districts to put time and effort into ensuring that they secure leaders who can do the difficult but crucial work of leading learning. In this article, we describe ways in which forward-thinking districts go about planning and implementing leadership development for educational leaders in service of improved student learning.

## SYSTEMIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

The Connecticut Center for School Change partners with districts across the state to help produce systemic instructional improvement. In this capacity, we have a rich opportunity to observe multiple districts, learning alongside them as they plan and implement leadership development.

Over time, we have come to learn that those districts that are particularly successful in developing leadership talent are not simply creating leadership programs or formalizing new teacher leader roles. Nor are they just recruiting





derneath the choice of those strategies lies a logic — a theory of action — that explains the district’s beliefs about why and how that strategy will lead to what desired results by when.

Thoughtful districts are not developing generic leaders. They are developing leaders who can execute and support the local theory of action. These districts have a clear and articulated vision of effective leadership, often in the form of core competencies and dispositions — we use the term “leadership framework” as a broad phrase that includes the variety of formats and vocabulary that are used to describe these competencies. The efforts of these districts to develop leadership continually reinforce the direction of the district and the vision of leadership necessary to pursue that direction.

In one of our partner districts, the superintendent and cabinet have developed a concise and cogent statement of the theory of action for district improvement. The theory of action — which focuses on improving the quality and rigor of academic tasks by providing targeted professional support — is the North Star for the district, guiding all aspects of district strategy.

Over the course of several weeks, a task force of central office administrators, principals, and teachers analyzed current research and made strategic and structured visits to investigate the leadership practices in effective schools.

The task force then created a leadership framework that describes the competencies and dispositions that building leaders need in order to effectively improve student learning within the context of the district and the district’s theory of action.

District leaders now use this leadership framework to develop tools for recruiting and screening future leaders. Professional learning for building and central office administrators is designed according to the framework. The dis-

more aggressively from certification programs or other districts. Effectiveness is not about any one activity or list of activities.

These districts are creating systems of leadership talent development aligned directly to the improvement efforts and culture of the district. While the details differ, we have observed five common leadership development practices across these districts, and these practices are correlated with the emergence of current and future leadership, sustainability of organizational improvement over time, and increased student performance.

These practices are not quick fixes or silver bullets. They are not programs or panaceas. They are an inter-related set of practices that promote an intentional and systemic approach to developing leaders for today and tomorrow. They are practices that create focus and coherence across the system.

## 1 Ground leadership development efforts in the district’s theory of action for improvement.

Every district in America is implementing strategies intended to help produce educational improvement. Un-

trict is implementing a new aspirant leadership program, and its curriculum aligns directly to the leadership framework.

Leadership is not a general or vague idea in the district. Instead, there is a vivid image of what effective leaders do, an image informed by research and situated in its specific context and theory of action.

## 2 Develop leadership to fuel sustainability over time.

Leaders of strong districts are not simply leading for today. They are thinking about how their efforts will sustain over time and ultimately lead to desired outcomes for future cohorts of students. They are working to shift best practice to common practice that can outlive superintendent transitions, endure new reform flavors of the month, and persist long enough to translate into improved student learning. Put another way, they have moved beyond succession planning to sustainability planning.

If the district is not clear on its purpose, its vision, and its theory of action, there is not a lot to sustain and, therefore, who occupies which boxes on the district's organizational chart does not matter. Indeed, one measure of a district that has set a clear direction and a strategy for meeting its goals is that the current leadership cares very much that the plans that they have worked so hard to design are implemented well, and therefore they are committed to ensuring that the people who are selected for leadership positions are capable of executing them successfully.

One of our partner districts develops leadership for sustainability by consistently reaching into the organization to engage those individuals most needed to execute a given improvement initiative. Every time a plan is being developed, the district leaders tap building administrators and teacher leaders to be part of the planning process, sharing their perspectives and developing from the beginning a shared sense of the problem the organization is trying to solve.

This district has learned that finding and deploying multiple sources of leadership in the organization has multiple positive effects. First, it shortens the window of time for implementation as more of the professionals responsible understand the rationale and the details of the initiative.

Second, it reduces the reliance upon particular leaders, as there are now more champions of the initiative distributed across the organization.

Third, it increases the leadership capacity of the district as more people — including those not currently serving in leadership positions — acquire the experiences so important for the development of expertise in any field.

## 3 Leverage the power of experience to drive leadership development.

Adults come to any situation with a rich store of experiences. Moreover, we know that adults (and children) learn by doing. Putting these two big ideas together, strong districts adopt strategies that support both: They help educators become

researchers of their own experience, and they construct experiences that function as the raw material for leadership development. They create ways to help current and future leaders use their experience to promote skill building and problem solving.

Moreover, they purposefully design learning experiences that allow leaders to actively participate in real work, rather than assuming that the experience that happens inevitably — but somewhat randomly — with age and years of service will be enough to generate effective leaders. As a result, leadership development experiences in these districts regularly break away from one-shot workshops and move toward cycles of action, analysis, and reflection.

One of our partner districts has created an academy for aspiring leaders designed to help grow the next generation of leaders in the system. Each year, a small cohort of teacher leaders is selected for the current leadership they possess and for the potential they exhibit.

Throughout the yearlong program, academy members examine their experiences to develop competencies that the district believes are most associated with success. Every time they come together, academy members work through their own living case studies, analyzing the practical problems of practice that they experience on a day-to-day basis. These become a practical and personal source of learning material.

In addition, the academy creates new experiences for the participants, providing short-term placements to develop new skills and competencies. For example, a teacher in his fifth year of teaching was placed on a districtwide committee focused on reducing absenteeism. This teacher was learning about how to work directly with assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators as an equal member of the committee.

At the same time, he was being challenged to think beyond his classroom and his school in recommending policies, structures, and systems that could span the entire district — a perspective that benefited him, his school, and the district in designing strategy for improvement.

## 4 Invest in reflection to amplify learning.

Key to successfully leveraging experience is the discipline and habit of reflection. Reflection is the process of making meaning from experience. It goes beyond the surface level of what went well and what needs to be improved.

It allows leaders to generate theories about why actions lead to results, which allows them to consolidate their experience into lessons learned. Those lessons can then be used to develop theories of action for how to bring about a desired result in the future. When reflection is shared among leaders, the organization as a whole benefits — it becomes a learning organization.

Effective districts recognize and put into place deliberate structures and routines to support the consolidation of learning through reflection. Weaving reflection regularly throughout leadership development opportunities, these districts purpose-

fully model the forms of professional reflection they want for all practitioners individually and for the district collectively.

One of our partner districts has begun institutionalizing a simple form of reflection throughout all of its leadership development efforts. Future and current principals have opportunities to think about a few simple but powerful questions: What did I do? What were the results? How do I explain those results? What did I learn about the work? What did I learn about myself? What is the next level of work?

For example, at the end of principals meetings, administrators get out their journals or tablets, theorize about their recent leadership experiences in writing, and then share with a colleague. Within an aspirant principal program the district has initiated, participants produce a final portfolio where they document not just what they have accomplished, but the evolution of their thinking.

These protocols are asking individual leaders to live the same cycle of continuous improvement that they are expected to create and sustain in the organizations they lead. The process of harnessing inquiry and reflection during individual and organizational learning thus becomes institutionalized at the same time as leadership is developed and nurtured.

## 5 Ensure the quality of leadership development activities.

Effective districts do not merely design and implement leadership development strategies. They invest considerable energy and time in understanding how the strategies are being implemented, the overall quality of the work, and whether leaders are ultimately enacting the dispositions and competencies desired.

These districts deliberately engage leaders in conversations about what quality looks like, thereby reclarifying or even raising the expectations around effective leadership and effective leadership development.

Some of these practices are about organizational coherence, aligning the leadership framework to the other strategies, systems, and structures of the district. Others are about leadership growth based on what we know about how adults learn best. Together, they represent an interrelated collection of intentional practices focused on developing leaders who can deliver on bold improvement agendas, now and into the future.

Districts committed to these practices will also work to ensure they are practiced. It is not enough to design systems, structures, and routines. Districts have to hold the organization and leaders within the organization accountable for executing them at the highest quality.

One of our partner districts has developed systems of quality control and coherence by articulating a set of standards for what constitutes effective leadership development and professional learning. Facilitators from across the district are asked to reflect on each session, asking themselves the degree to which they were successful in designing and implementing an experience that aligned with the district's leadership development standards.

They use a program evaluation instrument that asks participants to assess the experience relative to those standards. The district does not take for granted that the leaders involved in high-quality professional learning for themselves will automatically plan and implement similarly high-quality professional learning for the educators with whom they work.

Modeling without explicit guidance as to what is being modeled and why is limited in its power, and so expectations are set for how professional learning will be implemented throughout the district. Central office staff observe and monitor professional learning at every level, providing feedback and helping leaders engage in continuous improvement cycles.

## ALIGNED LEARNING CREATES SUSTAINABILITY

Leadership matters. This reality defines a district challenge: how to guarantee that every school has access to effective leadership, today and tomorrow. Exceptional leaders shift cultures, raise expectations, and improve performance. Ensuring that exceptional leaders exist in every school and district demands more much more than simply creating a leadership academy, recruiting more aggressively, or retooling professional development offerings.

Districts that are serious about developing leaders who can bring about change that leads to improved student learning will align professional support systems to how adults learn best, leveraging the energy of experience and power of reflection to help current and future leaders develop. Moreover, they will not leave these efforts to chance, regularly monitoring and constantly improving leadership development efforts.

We cannot emphasize enough that adopting the plans cited here without an overall strategy is an easy route to frustration. Making certain that improved leadership leads to improved student learning requires articulating a clear, logical sequence: building a leadership framework that leads to improved professional learning, which leads in turn to more effective school and district leadership and resulting changes in organization and instruction that will lead to improved outcomes for students.

Districts committed to systemic improvement will anchor all their efforts to develop leaders within their theory of action for improvement. Developing this strategy requires deep thinking, authentic commitment to continuous improvement, and the will to embark on, and sustain, a long-term systemic improvement plan.

But it is worth it. Such a strategy will develop sources of leadership that can help improvement efforts endure over time, enabling effective practice to turn into common practice.

•  
**Richard W. Lemons (rlemons@ctschoolchange.org) is deputy director and Isobel Stevenson (istevenson@ctschoolchange.org) is program coordinator at the Connecticut Center for School Change in Hartford, Connecticut. ■**