Leadership development

SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS SEEKING HIGH PERFORMANCE NEED STRONG LEADERS

**BY CHERYL GRAY
AND QUENTIN BISHOP**

Karen Waldrop is on her way to a graduate class offered for teacher leaders by a local university in partnership with her school district. As she leaves her school, she exchanges greetings with her principal, who is just returning from a half-day of mentoring training. They briefly discuss the group of aspiring leaders who are getting ready to begin a full-time, semester-long

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principal internship. Her principal encourages Waldrop to think about joining the next cohort of the district's principal preparation program once she completes her teacher leadership endorsement. He mentions the incentives for becoming a principal of one of the low-performing schools, a job for which he knew she would excel. As Waldrop pulls away from the school, her professional home for more than 20 years, she ponders the opportunities that would use her skills and experience to influence an entire school. She believes that the district's support for leadership development is making an impact on her career and the quality of instruction available to all its students.

Karen Waldrop isn't the only one thinking about the value of leadership development to learning in the classroom. Educators and policy makers have placed leadership development at the top of the school reform agenda,

believing that aspiring and new school leaders can learn the necessary skills to improve the most challenging schools. Leadership development builds the capacity of educators (teachers and administrators) to be effective in leadership roles or processes, enabling leaders to work together in productive and meaningful ways that benefit student learning. School leaders need to know how to effect the changes necessary to "move the needle" on school performance. To be effective requires developing skills in various arenas, including leading change, focusing interventions, managing resources, improving instruction, and analyzing results. This type of professional learning must develop an individual's skill set within the context of teaching and learning in a particular school or district.

The Center for Creative Leadership describes three key drivers of leadership development: assess-

ment, challenge, and support. Leadership development is most effective when all three are present.

- Assessment identifies an individual's strengths, weaknesses, and development needs.
- Challenge means taking people out of their comfort zones by facing them with new experiences and developing new capacities in the process.
- Support provides the individual with the motivation and belief that they can learn, grow, and change.

Any experience, the center's staff state, can be richer and more developmental by making sure that the elements of assessment, challenge, and support are present — even experiences that are not part of a formal leadership development program, such as a job assignment (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004).

Developing new leaders isn't limited to the ranks of administrators. To build sustainable leadership in schools, districts need to place a significant emphasis on the leadership capacities of teams and work groups. Teachers in leadership teams can create opportunities to engage a broader constituency in the work of improving a school. Harris and Muijs (2003) describe the teacher leader as a professional guide who models collegiality as a mode of work, enhances teachers' self-esteem, builds networks of human expertise and resources, creates support groups for school members, makes provisions for continuous learning, and encourages others to take on leadership roles.

Leadership development is closely tied with succession planning in school districts.

Anticipating leadership vacancies and responding by preparing a pool of highly qualified aspiring principals, often in partnership with local univer-

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sities, can provide "bench strength" — new leaders who are skilled and ready for the specific challenges of improving student learning within the district's schools.

What are the conditions that contribute to the success of leadership development initiatives?

Role-embedded learning. High-quality training, coupled with on-the-job application of knowledge and practices, are qualities of effective leadership development practices. Learning about leadership traditionally takes place in school classrooms, on university campuses, or even online through distance learning opportunities. There is no comparable substitute, though, for the learning that comes as a result of acting in the role of a leader, contending with the authentic situations and real-world consequences that can be garnered from a school-based field experience, practicum, or internship. These experiences challenge novice leaders to translate theory into everyday practice by experiencing the actu-

al responsibilities of a school leader.

Mentors to coach performance. Good mentors provide the day-to-day feedback and coaching to help with transitioning from the role of classroom teacher (or other roles) to that of a school leader. Mentoring helps novice leaders shape beliefs — beliefs about whole-school change, students' capacities to learn, relationships with staff and community members, and ethical leadership practices. Results from a Southern Regional Education Board mentoring study indicate that the haphazard strategies and structures of the mentoring process — and the absence of organizational investment and accountability — return results by chance and not by design and commitment (Gray, Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2007). Resources for mentor training, time for mentors to meet with novices, substitute teachers during class and field-based learning experiences, and financial incentives are investments to ensure high-quality mentoring for all novice leaders.

Focused learning experiences. Leadership development includes opportunities for emerging leaders to

solve a range of school problems, first through observing and participating and then by actually leading teams in identifying, implementing, and evaluating improvement interventions. These experiences should include working with teachers on what represents good teaching practice and what evidence indicates a student has met or exceeded a standard. A written plan can focus experiences on instructional leadership such as working with teachers and parents to build support for improvement efforts and with the faculty to manage and evaluate an improvement initiative.

Competencies or standards to guide performance. Many districts and universities create or adopt a set of competencies to guide the performance of new leaders before becoming a school or district leader. These competencies usually cluster the essential skills of school leaders into categories, such as understanding the school and classroom practices that contribute to student achievement, working with teachers and others to design and implement continuous student improvement, or providing the necessary support for staff to carry out sound school, curriculum and instructional practices (Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2005). Focusing on the key processes or roles of leaders are another way to guide performance, such as the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education, which assesses how well a school leader ensures that six core components of schools related to student achievement are in place (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2007).

Reflection on practice. Leadership development is most effective when new leaders understand and practice leadership behaviors and then

> Researchers found that effects of successful leadership are considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances.

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Are You Sure You're the Principal? A Guide for New and Aspiring Leaders, 2nd edition, by Susan Villani. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008.

Developing Teacher Leaders: How Teacher Leadership Enhances School Success, 2nd edition, by Frank Crowther, Margaret Ferguson, and Leonne Hann. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008.

"Inside the journal of an administrator," by Michelle Contich. (2006, Summer). *JSD, 27*(3), 43-46.

"Keep the leadership pipeline flowing," by Bill Hall. (2008, Summer). *JSD, 29*(3), 33-36.

Leadership Coaching for Educators: Bringing Out the Best in School Administrators, by Karla Reiss. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006.

Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs, by Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson, Margaret Terry Orr, and Carol Cohen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007.

Reframing Teacher Leadership to Improve Your School, by Douglas B. Reeves. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2008.

Teacher Leadership, by Ann Lieberman and Lynn Miller. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

reflect on their decisions and actions. Many leadership development programs require reflection journals or logs to help track the experiences contributing to proficiency on leadership standards. Capturing personal thoughts in a journal to share with cohort members or the mentor is a great start to becoming a reflective practitioner.

What insights does research provide for school district leaders to support leadership development?

Leadership matters. Research by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) found that not only does leadership matter, but that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school." They also found that effects of successful leadership are

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considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances.

Effective leadership development, then, can hold tremendous promise for improving schools and increasing student achievement. Like any results-driven work, it requires significant investments of energy, time, and resources to create the conditions and enact the behaviors that fulfill this promise.

Two decades of research on teacher leadership provides the following conditions that school districts can promote in order to foster teacher leaders (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

- A schoolwide focus on learning, inquiry, and reflective practice;
- Encouragement for taking initiative;
- An expectation of teamwork and shared responsibility, decision making, and leadership;

- Teaching professionals who are valued as role models;
- Colleagues who recognize and respect teacher leaders with subject-area and instructional expertise;
- High trust and positive working relationships among teacher peers and administrators;
- Teacher leadership work that is central to the teaching and learning processes (as opposed to administrative or managerial tasks);
- Teacher-leader and administrator-leader domains clearly defined, including their shared leadership responsibilities; and
- Positive interpersonal relationships between teacher leaders and the principal.

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The Southern Regional Education Board's research has provided school districts with these actions to ensure leadership development initiatives result in a high-quality pool of school leaders (Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2005; Gray, Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2007):

- Design leadership development to align with state leadership standards and district leadership needs.
- Integrate leadership development with succession planning, hiring, induction, and evaluation.
- Partner with universities and other providers to develop school leaders.
- Select experienced, highly skilled principals as mentors; provide released time, training, resources, remuneration, and recognition for their work.
- Require and provide training for mentors, including using observation protocols and providing feedback on performance.

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