

SREB 2008 Annual Leadership Forum

The fifth annual SREB Leadership Forum brought together some of the foremost innovators and leaders in school leadership preparation, support and evaluation to present current research and initiatives that are shaping the discussion in school leadership. More than 150 state policy-makers, higher education leaders and district officials from 28 states and organizations attended the Forum, May 8-9 in Atlanta. The purpose of the gathering was to further understanding of the process for designing statewide leadership systems, the components of effective principal evaluation, the ways in which working conditions can impede or support leaders' school improvement efforts and the strategies for developing school leadership that can turn around chronically low-performing schools.

DESIGNING STATEWIDE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SYSTEMS

One of the Forum objectives was to provide participants an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the process of designing statewide school leadership systems that recruit, develop and support instructional leaders who are prepared to lead change in the most challenging school environments.

"One of the most important aspects of the forum is to collaborate with our state's leaders who would not necessarily come together under other forum circumstances."

SREB Learning-Centered Leadership Program Director Kathy O'Neill presented the five-phase SREB redesign model, probing the audience with essential questions that evoked states' self-assessment of their efforts in: creating learning-centered leadership standards; facilitating university and district collaboration; redesigning university-based preparation programs; embedding competency-based internships into leadership programs; and developing licensure systems that ensure improvement in student learning.

Break-Out Sessions on Designing Statewide Leadership Development Systems

The presentation was followed by break-out sessions in which representatives from Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee and Louisiana presented their own efforts in leadership system redesign, sharing setbacks, lessons learned and incremental successes. Common recommendations to participants interested in spurring the process in their own state included staying positive, persistent and creative in facing the sometimes frustrating setbacks that can occur; remaining committed to their goals; and learning from each other.

UNDERSTANDING PRINCIPAL EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Leading researchers in principal evaluation helped participants understand the components of an effective principal evaluation system that supports student achievement. Cheryl Gray, coordinator, Leadership Curriculum Development and Training, led a panel of district, state and higher education leaders in discussing the qualities and dividends of an effective principal evaluation system. Andrew Porter of the University of Pennsylvania, John Bell of the Alabama Department of Education and Jere Vyverberg of School Administrators of Iowa spoke of the importance of evaluation based on relevant, learning-centered leadership standards and benchmarks.

"I really appreciated the evaluation session. This spurred discussion among our group on a topic that we hadn't actually advanced previously."

John Bell explained how effective leadership evaluation models should incorporate evidence, artifacts, and observation through 360-degree anonymous surveys, to assess principal success in meeting the state and district standards. Important uses of assessment data include providing feedback for leadership preparation programs and holding programs accountable for their graduates. District superintendent Jere Vyverberg commented on the effects of assessment, saying that while the word itself initially carried negative connotations at the central office, the practice, by the end of one year of implementation, resulted in a complete, positive change of culture for the district.

State Team Work on Understanding Principal Evaluation Systems

In the group discussions that followed, state teams used an assessment tool to review their state's status in developing an effective principal evaluation system, what further steps they needed to take and how they could ensure effectiveness in the system. **Ohio** has written and adopted new leadership standards and is currently piloting a principal evaluation system aligned

to the standards. States such as **Georgia, Texas and Mississippi** are in initial phases of implementing principal assessments based on revised standards. While evaluations in **Alabama** are not yet aligned with state leadership standards, they are consistently administered and provide diagnostic information for professional development that improves performance.

CHANGING PRINCIPALS' WORKING CONDITIONS

SREB Senior Vice President Gene Bottoms led a panel discussion with Betty Fry, director, Leadership Research and Publications and Don McAdams, president of the Center on Reform of School Systems, Houston. Panel members discussed how states can foster working conditions for school leaders that improve teaching and learning. Betty Fry presented initial findings of an SREB study on principal working conditions. Regardless of levels of performance, knowledge and skills, even the best principals need district and state support through incentives, resource allocation and decision-making authority to help them lead schools in a new direction. Fry said the study reveals that state and district offices can create barriers for principals through burdensome policies and restrictions on autonomy. The report will offer strategies for all levels of education governance to remove barriers and enable principals to improve student performance.

Don McAdams spoke of district governance as policy-driven work. Policies, not resolutions, he said, should guide decisions, and all board members should know the policies and work to implement them. To keep the right perspective and focus, McAdams advised, the goal of increased student achievement should be part of the discussion at *every* board meeting. McAdams recommended a “tight-loose” balance in district management of schools. Districts must closely control the curriculum, for example, but can loosen their hold on

school management issues such as personnel appointments. McAdams' recommendations for state agencies included clearly defining what boards are and are not responsible for and ensuring board members receive high-quality training.

State Team Work on Changing Principals' Working Conditions

Following the presentation, state teams met to discuss their state's status on ensuring positive working conditions for school leaders. In almost all states, principals have little or no autonomy for hiring and firing personnel. Most states profess supportive working conditions “in pockets” around the state — the gap delineated between high- and low-performing districts. **Louisiana, Florida and Oklahoma** reported strong support for principals through a district vision and focus on student achievement. These districts follow through on their vision by providing a variety of data to principals, along with training and assistance in how to use the data. Districts provide a framework of priorities to guide principals in instructional practices. Districts in **Louisiana**, for example, have created a comprehensive curriculum for all district schools. In **West Virginia**, the state provides the goals and the data for school-level improvement planning and high-quality professional development for principals.

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP FOR LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

The topic of developing leadership capacity in schools and districts to turn around low-performing schools was the focus of a panel discussion, three break-out sessions and the third round of state team discussions. SREB Senior Vice President Gene Bottoms led a panel that included Andrew Calkins of Mass Insight Education and Research Institute; Kathy Nadurak of the New York City Leadership Academy; and Yvonne Thayer of SREB's middle grades reform network, *Making Middle Grades Work*. The panel discussed strategies for leading change in high-poverty, low-performing schools in most urgent need. Breakout sessions followed, in which participants listened to presentations and asked questions of the three panelists.

As the steady incline in yearly school performance requirements persists, for a growing number of these schools pressure is becoming crisis. Despite their efforts, they face a critical challenge in offsetting the slide into deeper failure before improvement strategies can begin to pull them up. In his breakout session, Andrew Calkins, co-author of Mass Insight's *The Turnaround Challenge*, presented the Turnaround model of high-needs school improvement, which grew from a study of chronically low-performing schools that had transformed into high-achieving schools. The model addresses the need for three fundamental conditions of success in every school: readiness to learn, readiness to teach and readiness to act. The third category is where effective school leadership plays the critical role, and was the focus of Calkins' discussion.

In another session, Kathy Nadurak explained how the New York City Leadership Academy addresses leadership for the city's lowest-performing schools by developing instructional leadership-focused equity. The academy, with rigorous admissions standards and an intensive 15-month program of instruction and practical experience, serves the specific needs of New York City schools that are, in Nadurak's words, failing their students. Positioning students as its real clients, the academy trains leaders with a child-focused agenda. The demanding instructional program features problem-based learning, collaboration, research and mentored internships in city schools. Graduates of the program receive ongoing support from the academy and from collaborative professional groups that are formed during training.

Yvonne Thayer presented SREB efforts in developing leadership capacity in low-performing schools through a partnership with the South Carolina Department of Education. The project will create a leadership academy that provides training to leadership teams in 30 high schools and middle grades schools. SREB recognizes the potential for strong leadership within these schools and believes leaders will emerge from them, given the encouragement, support and professional development targeted to their needs. Key components of the leadership training include focused support and involvement of district leaders, an emphasis on changing adult behaviors to influence student success, and an emphasis on leadership as the work of teams, not individuals. After completion of the program, school improvement coaches will provide school leaders with ongoing support to sustain efforts over the long term.

State Team Work on Developing Leadership for Low-Performing Schools

With new insight into the issues and possibilities of chronically failing schools, state teams met again to assess their state's status on developing leadership capacity in this area. Most groups reported that their states communicated the importance of leadership in these schools and recognized that sustainable improvement depends on a collaborative effort that includes district and school leaders. Again, statewide coordination and consistency of effort was acknowledged as weak, and notes were made on next steps for coordinating support and services. The **Kentucky** team reported that their state uses the Standards and Indicators for School Improvement (SISI), their Comprehensive School Reform framework, but noted a need to renew emphasis on SISI for *all* schools.

KEY SPEAKER: DR. REGINALD GREEN ADDRESSES URBAN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PREPARATION

Participants responded enthusiastically to Dr. Reginald Green's remarks and presentation during the Thursday evening dinner. A highly recognized specialist and noted writer on inner-city school education, principal preparation for urban school leadership, and school governance, Green teaches candidate leaders at the Center for Urban School Leadership (CUSL) at The University of Memphis. Dr. Green described how CUSL collaborates with districts in western Tennessee to recruit and select leadership candidates for a nontraditional training program to prepare leaders for urban schools that demand leadership qualities, tools and skills well beyond the traditional roles of administrative management. While the program is university-based, it is far from traditional. Much of the candidates' learning takes place outside the classroom in experiential leadership and team development activities,

focused seminars, professional conferences and field experiences. When in the classroom, candidates engage in active problem-based learning. Field experiences are guided by experienced coaches, and mentorship is an integral component of the first three years of placement in a leadership position. Graduates commit to serving the districts that nominated them for a minimum of three years.

Through its initiatives, CUSL has begun to build a cadre of leaders from and for the schools that most need them and obtain results from them. Green's leadership in CUSL and passion for preparing leaders with the core competencies necessary to create schools of excellence in today's urban districts were greatly appreciated by the Thursday evening dinner audience.

CONCLUSION

Participants of the SREB 2008 Annual Leadership Forum completed the two days of intensive immersion in learning, discussion and collaboration with a renewed sense of direction and potential for growth in their states and districts through nontraditional and innovative means of leadership development, evaluation and sustainability. Contacts were made within and among states, ideas were generated and, in many cases, progress was made by state teams toward rethinking leadership policy, preparation and working conditions for school leaders toward ensuring learning structures and environments that foster success for all students.

"I appreciate the opportunity to learn from others. Thank you for providing a forum in which we could share many practices that hold potential."

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