

The SREB Learning-Centered Leadership Program hosted its sixth Annual State Leadership Forum May 7 and 8, 2009, in Atlanta. More than 160 education leaders, district officials and policymakers from 25 states attended the forum to hear from practitioners who are getting results in student learning amidst crosscurrents of rising achievement goals and growing economic constraints.

A strong slate of featured speakers and panel experts presented the Forum topics and inspired rich discussion, comments and questions that enhanced learning for all.

Leadership teams develop capacity for teaching and learning

Robert Balfanz, research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of School at Johns Hopkins University, talked to state teams about the critical role of leadership teams in meeting the needs of students in struggling schools. Drawing on his substantial research on struggling schools and his practical experience as co-operator of the *Baltimore Talent Development High School*, Balfanz noted that in schools where 80 percent of students are disengaged and trouble-prone, school goals boil down to two essential elements: 1) positive teacher/student interaction — “kids come to schools for their teachers, not abstract ideas”; and 2) quality, engaging and rigorous course work.

How do schools get there? Balfanz emphasized that facilitating a culture of teamwork is the first step. The “lone-warrior principal” model is no longer relevant to schools’ needs. Balfanz spoke of overwhelmed teachers and leaders in

struggling schools — especially middle grades schools — resulting in leadership transience, serial efforts and a lack of program and faculty cohesion. Teacher teams provide mutual support and leverage teachers’ unique skills and abilities through collaborative efforts. But to work, teacher teams need facilitational leadership, including the provision of scheduled meeting time, training in the use of data, and investment in continual learning. Balfanz’s presentation evoked further discussion and questions on scheduling, advocating for policy, evaluating rigor using an Olympic-type model, and defining relevance. To read more about Balfanz’ work, visit: http://www.nmsa.org/portals/0/pdf/research/Research_from_the_Field/Policy_Brief_Balfanz.pdf

Adolescent literacy is key to raising graduation rates

Award-winning author **Alfred Tatum** of the University of Illinois at Chicago kicked off an important discussion about adolescent literacy. Tatum made a compelling case for why the typical strategies for teaching urban youth often fail, explaining that current approaches to teaching literacy do not reach students in ways that are meaningful to them. He pointed out that equipping a student with “a fluency strategy” or “choice” in selecting a text is often competing with immediate survival interests such as recovering from being displaced from home by a hurricane or living in the constant shadow of lethal violence. Effective approaches to preparing school leaders, and developing useful policies to improve adolescent literacy, suggests Tatum, must attend to the goal of improved “life outcomes” for each young person, not simply short-term measures of reading achievement. Reading and writing can and should be harnessed to help urban students process the trauma and chaos of living in high poverty. Ultimately, Tatum called for more sustained attention to defining what adolescent literacy means and how to develop literacy for *all* students — both high- and low-performing. In preparing school principals, Tatum recommended two courses for all pre-service principals: one focused on adolescent literacy and reading across the curriculum, and the second course focused on leading literacy.

A panel discussion continued the focus on adolescent literacy. SREB president **Dave Spence** presented *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States*, a new report by a committee of SREB state education leaders chaired by Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine. The report is the result of a year-long study of literacy research and policy and concludes that “Reading comprehension is learning.” The report reinforced Tatum’s message that adolescent reading comprehension should be a top priority for states and schools to improve overall achievement. It outlines policies and actions states can take to improve adolescent literacy to boost student achievement and graduation rates. A copy of the report is available online at http://www.sreb.org/publications/2009/09E01_Critical_Mission_Reading_.pdf

Adding the voice of the practitioner to the conversation, **Vernon Prosser**, former principal of Broome High School in South Carolina (now superintendent in York County District One, South Carolina), explained how his school made great strides in literacy and student achievement by “doing away with the department.” The entire faculty worked to embed reading comprehension instruction strategies throughout the curriculum using technology, extra help for students, no-zero grading practices, and lexile level measurements of student reading skills and comprehension in all subject areas.

Partnerships break through old mindsets to induce new growth

When the Forum first convened six years ago, very few states had shifted substantially toward redesigning leadership preparation programs. While there are still a few states working on launching statewide redesign efforts, many states are facing challenges further along the implementation continuum. SREB’s research and work in the field has revealed that developing and sustaining healthy, thriving and productive partnerships among university preparation programs and local school districts is a paramount concern in states that have undergone effective program redesign.

Representatives from three states engaged Forum participants in a discussion about university-district partnerships. **Richard Hayes**, Dean of the College of Education at the University of South Alabama, talked about overcoming a culture of antagonism between the two entities, which assumes that universities and public schools have separate purposes and goals. Hayes noted that, as a public institution, his university shares the same moral and fiscal obligations as public schools to contribute to the learning of every child. It was on this platform that Hayes was able to garner the support of the university provost to make the structural changes necessary in the

principal preparation program. **Betty Fry**, SREB consultant with the Florida Leadership Academy for Schools of Innovation and Improvement, spoke of having to overcome a disinclination in public institutions to form partnerships, which required restructuring their own goals to form a common vision and momentum. **Judith Monseur** of the Ohio Department of Education discussed the need for states to encourage districts and universities to work together to ensure succession capacity; field-based, mentored training opportunities for student leaders; and strong induction support for new leaders.

In one of several breakout sessions, **Debbie Daniels** and **Phillip Rogers** of the Kentucky Department of Education and Education Professional Standards discussed the state’s role in overcoming resistance and promoting partnerships with a description of Kentucky’s initiative of partnerships among state education agencies, districts and universities, which not only has generated a cohesive leadership system with policies and regulations to back it, but also has created a professional learning community within the partnership itself, with future goals for growth and continued learning.

The right conditions help principals do what is needed

Research both by the Learning-Centered Leadership Program and from across the field of school leadership has shown that working conditions can either fuel success among well-prepared school leaders or derail their best efforts. Three break-out sessions at the forum engaged state teams in thinking about how to influence working conditions for principals in their state.

Jon Schmidt-Davis, SREB research and evaluation specialist, led one break-out session about SREB’s research on working conditions that sustain principal success. The findings of this research are reported in the new SREB publication, *The District Leadership Challenge: Empowering Principals to Improve Teaching and Learning*. Data from seven districts showed a relationship between the language of support used by district office personnel and quantitative measures of success, including AYP status, graduation rate, and English and math scores. The study included six guidelines on what states can do to support districts in creating the kinds of conditions that are present in high-performing districts and schools. One of the fundamental changes needed is to “flip the pyramid,” entrenching a culture of “servant leadership,” by which districts exist to support schools, not vice versa, and everything is focused on instruction.

In her breakout session, **Lou Howell** of the Iowa Support System for Schools and Districts in Need of Assistance presented an example of Iowa’s efforts to support districts in implementing the kinds of recommendations advanced by SREB’s report. In Iowa, she said, “the state is the ‘outside technical assistance’ these districts and schools need.” The state support system audits each district, prepares a diagnosis and designs a process within 90 days. The assistance is hands-on; state leaders spend a good deal of time in district offices; analysis of school data is continual; and the system delivers the data punctually to all stakeholders.

Brady Link, Superintendent of Christian County Schools in Kentucky, provided a district-level perspective on the cultural qualities of a district that exists to support principals and teachers. The cornerstone of leadership in Link’s district is the assessment of leaders’ beliefs. Principals know what they are supposed to believe, but whether they truly believe that all students can learn, and

other axioms of school improvement, can be shown by results. Assessing beliefs is central to the leader selection process, and once principals are selected, the superintendent stands behind them. District leadership is flexible — “if it doesn’t work, we’ll change it,” Link said — and focused on instruction. Meetings held twice monthly with school leaders, district leaders, business office staff and auxiliary staff minimize managerial issues (which are left to be handled through email, not during face-to-face time) and function more like a professional learning community focused on how to improve student learning. The driving force behind *all* district efforts is the “urgency to help children learn.”

State teams evaluate their state’s progress and plan future steps

Some of the most valued Forum time for participants is spent in dedicated work time with their state teams. States had three opportunities to meet together and work through guided discussion of their state’s school leadership needs and strategies to begin or accelerate initiatives.

The first question state teams worked with asked what it would take for their state to prepare school leaders who knew how to facilitate teamwork in focusing the school culture on curriculum, instruction and assessment. Among many ideas generated were: overcoming the disconnect between educators and the policy community; delivering professional development to teams rather than individuals; changing (raising) expectations in the community; and building formative leader evaluation instruments that drive teaming forward.

Some of the barriers teams acknowledged in their efforts included a lack of time for teachers to be both teachers and leaders, resistance to change in some higher education institutions, inconsistent preparation program curriculum and limited resources for full-time internships and mentoring programs.

In a second state team session, teams looked at what their state could do to ensure reading comprehension becomes a priority in the drive for increase graduation rates. One of the basic components to this effort, one state reported, was for preparation programs to include at least two courses in balanced literacy and more training in reading in content areas. Best practice models, shared focus and resources to support teachers were also cited.

The third teamwork session focused on the development of benchmarks for measuring states’ progress in redesigning principal preparation programs in addition to the seven used in the SREB biennial benchmark reports of 2002 through 2007.