

Policy Notes

Leadership Changes: Minimizing the Downside

Anyone who works in education has experienced the problem of leadership change. A new chief state school officer, a new district superintendent, a new board majority, a new principal. New leadership almost inevitably brings significant systemic changes. While often the desire for change is the reason that a new leader has been brought aboard, too often the changes bring an end to promising work begun under the previous leader. When this happens

- significant investments are lost
- progress related to some major facet of school improvement and transformation often is undermined
- staff and other stakeholders are reinforced in their belief that efforts to make significant changes are likely to end when the next new leader is appointed (“This is just another initiative that will require hard work and not survive the next change in leadership -- so maybe we shouldn’t put that much into it.”)
- the new leader’s agenda for change may be seen as shortsighted.

A Major Example: Improving Student and Learning Supports

Efforts to move student and learning supports out of the margins of school improvement policy and practice provide a major example. Research unambiguously documents the need for development of a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports that plays out effectively in every school. Increasing recognition of this over the last 15 years has led diverse SEAs, LEAs, and schools to design and begin to implement such a system. Some of these efforts are trailblazing innovations stemming from significant investments of creativity, time, and other valuable resources.

In some places (as is inevitable), leadership underwent change before systemic changes were firmly established. In each of these instances, the new leader did not analyze whether his/her new agenda should include promising work already underway to develop a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. As a result, not only was the work undermined, the new agenda renewed the marginalization of student and learning supports and deemphasized the need to continue to rework such supports so they are more effective in dealing with factors interfering with student performance.

The irony, of course, is that everyone agrees there are many factors interfering with students doing well at school. And research shows that the current ways schools try to address such factors eats up considerable resources with weak results. Nevertheless, for various reasons, the agenda introduced by a new leaders usually is not strong on ways to address such factors more effectively. In such instances, we have seen innovative and promising efforts that are underway to develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports totally ignored and shut down.

What to do to Minimize the Downside of Leadership Succession

The Wallace Foundation stresses the importance of having a “leadership succession plan.” In doing so, they draw on recommendations from the Southern Regional Education Board. The emphasis is on regularly identifying promising candidates and creating early opportunities for them to develop leadership skills. Few will argue with the importance of developing a strong leadership pool from which to recruit. However, much more must be addressed in order to counter trends to throw out promising work when a new leader sets out to put her/his mark on the organization.

Here are few things we recommend as a way to reduce the likelihood that a leadership change will undermine efforts to develop a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports at schools. The key is to institutionalize the work from its onset. That is, as the work proceeds, consider the following:

- I. *Sustainability education* – all involved need to understand the importance of and strategies for sustaining the work when leadership and other major changes occur.
- II. *Policy considerations* – the focus is on ensuring that
 - A. the governing board understands and has formally enacted policy related to developing such a system and, if feasible, has established a standing subcommittee focused specifically on unifying and developing the system;
 - B. the policy is spelled out in guidance documents, school improvement plans, and professional development calendars.
- III. *Operational infrastructure changes* -- The focus is on ensuring that
 - A. there is a formalized position dedicated to a high level leader for the developing and implementing the learning supports system (with job description and relevant accountabilities;
 - B. the operational infrastructure is reworked so that efforts to unify and develop a comprehensive system are no longer marginalized in the institution (e.g., the learning supports leader sits at decision making tables, the work is a regular agenda item, there is a leadership team focused on the development and implementation of the system, the work is detailed on a dedicated and major section on the website);
- IV. *A well-prepared briefing for new leaders* (e.g., by the learning support leadership team) – providing a detailed analysis covering the purposes and progress of the work, the implications for enhancing student and school performance, the potential financial savings, and the public relations value of the work.

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 we will synthesize and circulate what we receive.

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