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EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

# A Bridge to School Reform

The Wallace Foundation's National Conference  
New York City ■ October 22–24, 2007

Featuring comments by:

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This and other resources on education leadership, arts participation and out-of-school-learning can be downloaded for free at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

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# Introduction

Leadership is an essential ingredient for ensuring that every child in America gets the education they need to succeed. Indeed, education leadership has been called the “bridge” that can bring together the many different reform efforts in ways that practically nothing else can. Teachers are on the front lines of learning. But principals at the school level, and superintendents at the district level, are uniquely positioned to provide a climate of high expectations, a clear vision for better teaching and learning, and the means for everyone in the system – adults and children – to realize that vision.

As one New York City principal recently put it, “It is not just about being an administrator, it’s about being instructional leaders.”

Improving leadership has been the sole focus of The Wallace Foundation’s education efforts since 2000. And it was the theme of Wallace’s most recent national education conference, titled “A Bridge to School Reform,” held in New York City on October 22-24, 2007, that brought together some 425 participants including governors, mayors, superintendents, principals, researchers, journalists, field leaders and influencers.

Again and again, the conference highlighted what experience to date has taught us: that in order to get the leaders we want and need in every school, it’s not enough to improve their training, as urgent as that is. States and districts also need to create:

- **Standards** that spell out clear expectations about what leaders need to know and do to improve instruction and learning and that form the basis for holding them accountable for results; and
- **Conditions and incentives** that support the ability of leaders to meet those standards. These include the availability of data to inform leaders’ decisions; the authority to direct needed resources to the schools and students with the greatest needs; and policies that affect the recruitment, hiring, placement and evaluation of school leaders.

Each of these core elements for better education leadership is vital. But what is equally important is that states and districts need to work much more closely together in creating more supportive leadership standards, training and conditions. To create, in other words, what we’ve come to call a *cohesive leadership system*.

Thus a core theme in this conference was that collective action by states and districts, rather than isolated or uncoordinated efforts on single elements of leadership improvement, is the most likely pathway to lasting, systemwide change. And at this conference, we heard examples of how such a cohesive system is beginning to emerge in states like Iowa, Delaware and Massachusetts, and in districts like New York City and Atlanta. A number of these examples are discussed in the pages that follow.

Yet we also heard many reminders that such collaboration has not been the historic norm in education policy. Efforts at state-district policy coordination remain relatively new, and are

yielding both early successes and cautionary lessons about the challenges of maintaining the momentum of positive change. Until we see more examples of broad, coordinated action and distill the lessons from those efforts, we are almost certain to continue to hear many principals complain that they have to fight a calcified and often-unfriendly system to achieve the high expectations being placed on them by an increasingly impatient nation.

The discussions about the successes and practical challenges of education leadership improvement efforts at our national conference were rich, relevant and refreshingly candid. While it's impossible to recount them all, this brief publication offers highlights from those discussions as well as detailed excerpts from several of the keynote addresses.

The report opens with a commentary by M. Christine DeVita, president of The Wallace Foundation, who describes the progress

to date of the foundation's education leadership initiative and the key lessons learned. As she observed, "The national conversation has shifted from 'whether' leadership really matters or is worth the investment, to 'how' – how to train, place and support high-quality leadership where it's needed the most: in the schools and districts where failure remains at epidemic levels."

Richard Colvin, the distinguished education journalist and director of The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College, Columbia University, served as the conference rapporteur. His essay provides specific highlights from the meeting about how states, districts and university leaders are grappling with the challenges of education leadership improvement.

Finally, this report contains extended excerpts from two of the conference's keynote speakers:

- Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University, who outlined the elements of effective school leadership training that emerged from her recently-published research on exemplary preparation programs<sup>1</sup>; and
- Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, a Washington-based education and child advocacy organization, who provided vivid examples of how no-nonsense school and district leaders are making the critical difference in proving that children from even the most disadvantaged urban and rural backgrounds can excel as learners.

Readers who wish to learn more about education leadership issues are encouraged to visit the Knowledge Center at The Wallace Foundation website, [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson, Margaret Orr, and Carol Cohen, *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Programs*, Stanford, CA: Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007

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*“States and districts need to work much more closely together in creating more supportive leadership standards, training and conditions.”*

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# Leadership: The Bridge to Better Learning<sup>1</sup>

By M. Christine DeVita, President, The Wallace Foundation



Our efforts to improve public education in this country will not succeed until we get serious about strengthening school leadership. Let me explain why.

In 2000, Diane Ravitch published *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform*, a chronicle of the successive waves of reform that swept over our public education system in the past century. Her book begins with the observation that “For most of the twentieth century, Americans have argued about their public schools.”<sup>2</sup>

Those arguments have followed us into the 21st century. And unless we’re careful, they will persist. We need to stop arguing, find common ground, and build bridges among our various reform efforts, so that we can achieve our goal of educating all of our children for productive adulthood in a future we can now only imagine.

And that brings us to **leadership** — the bridge that can bring together all the required elements of school reform into a coherent whole.

Improving education leadership at all levels of the system — state, district and school — has been the sole focus of The Wallace Foundation’s efforts in education since 2000. We’ve invested some \$200 million and worked directly with dozens of states, districts and researchers to develop and test ways to improve leadership and share the lessons broadly. And leadership was the subject of Wallace’s most recent national education conference in New York City on October 22-24, 2007 that drew some 425 of the nation’s education leaders and thinkers.

The theme of the conference was “A Bridge to School Reform.” As the landmark report, *How Leadership Influences Learning* reminds us: “Leadership provides a critical bridge between most educational reform initiatives, and having those reforms make a genuine difference for all students.”<sup>3</sup>

The report goes on to observe: “There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders. While other factors within the school also contribute to such turnarounds, leadership is the catalyst.”

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<sup>1</sup> This paper incorporates and builds on remarks by M. Christine DeVita delivered at Wallace’s National Conference, “Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform,” in New York City on October 22, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform*, Simon & Schuster, 2001, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning: Review of Research*, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and produced jointly by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, the University of Minnesota, and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the University of Toronto, 2004, 5

In other words, there are no “leader-proof” reforms — and no effective reforms without good leadership. That’s why our nation’s underperforming schools are unlikely to succeed until we get serious about preparing and supporting school leaders.

This was not the accepted wisdom eight years ago when The Wallace Foundation announced a commitment to work with states and districts to develop and test ways to lift the quality of education leadership. At first, as we were gearing up our efforts and trying to “make the sale” that quality leadership was a critical yet often-missing ingredient for improving teaching and learning, there were doubters. And they had a point.

Until very recently, in fact, there was only scant evidence about what good leadership actually looks like in schools, districts and states, how leaders can best influence learning, what training those leaders need to

meet increasingly tough job demands, which state and district policies help leaders or get in their way, and what are the best ways to evaluate the behaviors and performance of school leaders so that effective practices are documented and rewarded, and ineffective ones are remedied.

We haven’t answered every question. But together with our partners, we’ve learned a lot about how to provide principals with the right leadership skills, and the working conditions or “web of support” they need so that they, and we, do not fail.

The national conversation has shifted from “whether” leadership really matters or is worth the investment, to “how” — how to train, place and support high-quality leadership where it’s needed the most: in the schools and districts where failure remains at epidemic levels.

- We have learned that we need to be more deliberate in identifying future leaders and then provide training that prepares graduates who can not only administer and manage, but *lead* — who can set a vision for student learning, create a climate in which teachers can learn, and build policies to support both.
- We have learned that the right leadership can make a measurable difference – in schools like Capitol View Elementary in Atlanta, Frankford Elementary in Delaware and Elmont Junior/Senior High in New York, and in entire urban districts like New York City where bold school and district-level leadership has been a major factor in dramatically lifting the performance of children, as Kati Haycock, president of The Education Trust, told our conference. (*More on those examples can be found in excerpts from Haycock’s address on pages 25-32*).
- We have learned what exemplary principal training really looks like in districts and universities. For the first time, a landmark report produced with Wallace’s support by Professor Linda Darling-Hammond and a team of Stanford education researchers

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*“There are no “leader-proof” reforms — and no effective reforms without good leadership.”*

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has documented evidence that when we get the training right, graduates are better prepared, more motivated to lead instruction, and far likelier to last as school leaders in tough school settings. (See excerpts from Darling-Hammond's keynote comments, pages 17-24)

- We have learned that improved leadership training is essential, but not enough. New principals need mentoring. But mentoring is more than a sympathetic ear. It means real guidance from knowledgeable professionals who have been trained for their mentoring role and who are engaged for a long-enough period of time to provide real benefits to the new leader.<sup>4</sup>
- We also know that even veteran leaders and their teams need support as well — ongoing professional development that reduces isolation and builds skills, time to focus on instruction, authority to allocate resources to meet the needs of their schools, and the right data to help them accurately guide their teachers and students.

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*“We’ve come a long way in understanding how to create more effective school leaders, but we are not there yet.”*

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New Mexico, Georgia and Michigan, for example, are developing and testing ways to ensure that leaders at each level of the system have the data they need to identify and respond more effectively to the needs of individual students.

And to address the challenge of more time for instruction, the Jefferson County, KY school district has pioneered a new school position called School Administration Manager. It did so after time studies documented that principals were spending a shocking 60 to 90 percent of their days focused on “administrivia” rather than instructional matters. The encouraging news is that the “SAM” position, combined with coaching for principals to use their time more effectively, has reversed that situation: now Louisville school leaders are spending 70 percent of their time on instruction, on average. Based on those early results, the SAMs program has spread rapidly and is currently being tried in some 200 schools in 11 states or districts.<sup>5</sup>

These and other important lessons were discussed at our conference and are emerging from the work going on in states and districts across the country, and from the growing body of research on what it takes to get the leadership we need.

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<sup>4</sup> However, experiences in our partner states and districts show that many mentoring programs fall far short of this standard. A critical analysis of existing mentoring programs along with policy implications for improving them can be found in *Getting Principal Mentoring Right: Lessons from the Field, A Wallace Perspective*, March 2007. Copies can be downloaded for free from the Wallace’s online Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)

<sup>5</sup> The 11 state or district sites that are piloting the SAM program are: Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, Louisville, Portland, OR, and Springfield, IL.



As these examples demonstrate, we've come a long way in understanding how to create more effective school leaders and in building a national commitment to education leadership. But we are not yet there. As an October 2006 report by a team of researchers at The University of Washington concluded: "Despite two decades of state and federal education policy instituting learning standards and accountability measures, accompanied by rhetoric advocating a high-quality equitable education for all students, *the quality of educational leadership writ large is neither uniformly high, nor focused to a great extent on learning.*"<sup>6</sup>

We need leadership to forge all of the various elements of today's school reform efforts into a well-functioning system that makes sense for those working hard to achieve results for children. A well-functioning system means not only improved training — but "a more coherent web of support for strong, learning-focused leadership in schools and school districts."<sup>7</sup>

Partial solutions — like new roles without the authority to carry them out, or more focus on learning without timely data on results — are likely to lead to failure. As Wallace's Director of Education Programs, Richard Laine, told the conference: "The reality is that if we continue to put good leaders into a bad system, we will also have to continue to bet on a system that has failed to serve far too many children."

We're still at the beginning of this national journey to better school leadership that can make a measurable difference in lifting student achievement across entire school districts and states. However, our collective work over the past eight years has given us a lot to build on, and we must continue this work with even greater urgency. Given the domestic and international challenges we face as a nation, our future depends on our success. As Aristotle reminds us, "All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth."

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*M. Christine DeVita has been president since 1987 of The Wallace Foundation, a private charitable foundation created by Lila and DeWitt Wallace, the founders of Reader's Digest.*

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<sup>6</sup> Michael S. Knapp et al., *Leading, Learning, and Leadership Support*, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, 2006, 11

<sup>7</sup> Knapp, 10

# Beyond Buzz: Leadership is Moving to the Heart of School Reform

By Richard Lee Colvin, Director, The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media, Teachers College, Columbia University



A successful book agent explained to me once the marketing concept of “buzz.” He wasn’t talking about selling toothpaste or cereal, though. He was talking about **ideas**, and how they can gain enough currency to take on a life of their own.

The idea under discussion at a three-day national meeting hosted by The Wallace Foundation in October 2007 was school leadership — as a central but often neglected ingredient of educational improvement. The meeting drew more than 400 leaders from across the country, including New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, three governors, state and district superintendents, principals, and many of the top thinkers and researchers in the education field.

Many of those who attended this gathering might well have reacted indifferently or skeptically just a few years ago to the idea of spending scarce time on the subject of leadership compared, say, to improving teaching. Now, however, research validating the critical importance of leadership is weighty enough, and there are enough concrete efforts in states, districts and schools, that this conference about leadership was about *how*, not *whether*, to move forward on this agenda. So while the buzz about educational leadership was evident at this meeting, the discussions also made abundantly clear that many in the nation are moving well beyond talk to serious action.

Stanford Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, for example, told the gathering that strong leadership is essential for strong teaching. Kati Haycock, another keynote speaker and president of the Education Trust, said that equity in education depends on leaders who are willing to bet everything on what can be done for all kids, without excuses.

But the meeting was also full of reminders of the challenges of realizing the goal of an effective leader in every school. Even in a state such as Iowa, which appears to have in place smart, comprehensive leadership policies, unanticipated issues can arise. Recurring themes in the conference were the importance of understanding how to lead change, turn around low performing schools, work productively with teachers unions, and make time for principals to focus on instruction. In addition, many conversations focused on how to make the job of principal more attractive to people with the qualities and talents the job requires.

To be sure, there was debate, disagreement, doubt and many unanswered questions. Noteworthy, however, was the frank and purposeful tone of the discussions, moving beyond theory and the aspirational, to the pragmatic and actual.

Miami Superintendent Rudy Crew said significant gains would come only if principals “are required to live out on the edge” and risk the failure that sometimes accompanies bold experiments. That moved Alexandria, Virginia principal Mel Riddile, a nationally recognized leader whose personal philosophy is “don’t be afraid to do something different,” to respond that, “We’re creating systems that do the opposite of what we want them to do,” he said. “Micromanagement kills innovation...The system is designed to make people march in a straight line.”

## PROGRESS AND UNANTICIPATED CHALLENGES

Among the more instructive lessons from the field came from Judy Jeffrey, director of the Iowa state Department of Education, who participated in a conversation about the policy implications of developing more effective principal preparation programs, an area of long-standing weakness. Iowa, Jeffrey said, already has put out of business weak preparation programs and is moving toward eliminating sub-standard superintendent programs as well. Accredited programs now are required to give their students opportunities to work alongside practicing principals in schools and to provide mentoring once the new principals are assigned schools of their own. Districts also are required to provide all first-time administrators with trained mentors, and the state has fostered the development of a statewide leadership academy as a model program.

“It would appear that we have all that we need” to provide quality school leadership training, she said.

Appearances can be misleading, she quickly added. The process of preparing to become a school administrator in Iowa focuses on instructional leadership. But the management responsibilities of principals have not gone away, she said, and a survey in Iowa found that principals feel hard pressed to devote enough time to helping faculty members improve their teaching.<sup>1</sup> Reducing the number of accredited programs may have left only those that are more likely to prepare effective leaders but, in a largely rural state, they are now located far away from many who need the training. Also, a corps of skilled, trained mentors did not magically appear on demand to support new principals. And the state hasn’t fully figured out how to recruit top teachers into the ranks of administrators, Jeffrey said.

Addressing these challenges in Iowa will be difficult, she predicted. The initiatives now in place have lulled some legislators into thinking they’ve already done as much as is needed. “With all the various reforms out there,” Jeffrey said, “the legislature is reluctant to spend

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*“We’re creating systems that do the opposite of what we want them to do. Micromanagement kills innovation. The system is designed to make people march in a straight line.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Survey of elected leaders of the School Administrators of Iowa, 2001. Accessed on November 24, 2007 at <http://www.sai-iowa.org/adminasinstruct.html>

money for paid internships and fellowships for people wanting to become principals. Improving leadership is not high on their list.”

Undaunted, however, the state is taking steps to address those issues, such as assuming control of mentoring to make sure it is of consistently high quality in all districts. Some aspects of leadership preparation have to be provided systemically, she said. “It’s no longer good enough to have random acts of goodness.”

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*“Getting the most problem-plagued schools moving in a positive direction requires principals to have a special set of skills”*

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A number of states besides Iowa — including Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Louisiana — have pressured colleges and universities to update their training programs. But many institutions of higher education have moved at a glacial pace to make improvements, or have made only cosmetic changes. New

research by Professor Darling-Hammond and a team of Stanford researchers identified six “exemplary” programs of various types whose participants typically felt better prepared for the demands of the job, were more committed to the profession, and were demonstrably more likely to be able to lead instructional improvement.<sup>2</sup> But a sobering report from the Southern Regional Education Board also discussed at the conference found that universities are slow to learn from such models. Even when state policies require them to change, the report concluded from a survey of 22 institutions that “many universities are not getting the job done.”<sup>3</sup>

As long as states accredit such programs and districts give raises to teachers who complete administrator training programs, universities will continue to attract tuition-paying students and will have little incentive to change, said Richard Laine, The Wallace Foundation’s Director of Education.

#### **PREPARING PRINCIPALS AS “TURNAROUND SPECIALISTS”**

Another set of practical insights emerged from a discussion of how, exactly, leaders get their schools to change. Having a vision matters but also requires a plan for making that vision real and for measuring progress. Leaders also have to be diagnosticians, as Brad Portin of the University of Washington puts it, because a school that is in crisis calls for a different set of actions and skills than does one that has made great strides.

Getting the most problem-plagued schools moving in a positive direction requires principals to have a special set of skills. One approach to creating a corps of these so-called

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson, Margaret Terry Orr, Carol Cohen, *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Programs*, Stanford University, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Betty Fry, Kathy O’Neill, Gene Bottoms, *Schools Can’t Wait: Accelerating the Redesign of University Preparation Programs* Southern Regional Education Board. Supported by the Wallace Foundation. 2007. p. 3.

“turnaround specialists” started in Virginia, with the backing of the state and Wallace. The concept is now spreading to other states.

Participants in a panel on the subject said principals have to impose order and discipline, while creating a caring learning environment; they have to quickly boost low performing students while not neglecting those who are doing well academically; and they have to build consensus among the faculty about what conditions need to change while also pushing teachers to abandon ineffective classroom practices.

But even the most skilled, hardest working principal cannot turn a school around on his or her own, said Jo Lynne DeMary, the former Virginia schools chief who now heads a leadership center at Virginia Commonwealth University. They need districts to be supportive — by creating a strike team, of sorts, to provide additional training and other services at the beginning of the turnaround; giving principals the authority they need to disrupt the status quo; and, yes, providing extra dollars. Turning around a school “cannot be done on the cheap,” DeMary said. District offices, however, often are as dysfunctional as low-performing schools and so are unable to deliver the support principals need.

Since its founding in 2003, The NYC Leadership Academy, whose work was featured at the conference, also has specialized in grooming new principals for this critical turnaround job. Sandra Stein, the academy’s CEO, said schools where its graduates have stayed for three years showed 31% faster growth in test scores than did schools led by principals with comparable levels of experience.

The pace of improvement, however, is often not steady. Stein said such schools often experience a “Hawthorne effect” making some gains the first year just because something different is being tried. The second year is often rougher, with more teacher turnover, more reports of incidents involving students, and stagnant student achievement. The reason, Stein said, is that in the second year teachers who are resisting change leave and incidents that had previously been ignored by “laissez faire principals” start being reported. “Don’t judge the results the second year,” she said because, usually, the school stabilizes and student achievement rises the year after.

“Maintaining a focus on student achievement” while trying to calm what can be chaotic schools is actually the biggest challenge for these principals, said Daniel L. Duke of the University of Virginia’s school of education.

#### **WHO SHOULD BE A PRINCIPAL?**

Another recurring question at the Wallace conference was what key characteristics school districts should look for in hiring principals. Can the “technical skills” required for running a school and supporting instruction be taught to those who have the right “people skills,” as Terry Grier, superintendent of the Guilford County Schools in North Carolina said? Or, as Rudy Crew suggested, do aspiring principals who have passion and commitment to the job nevertheless lack the leadership skills to make their vision a reality? New York’s Sandra Stein said her program seeks to develop resilience in principals to help them withstand the resistance they may face in trying to bring about change.

Public Agenda, an opinion research organization, addressed this question in a preliminary analysis of the responses from a series of focus groups of principals and superintendents who work in high-needs districts.<sup>4</sup> Based on those responses, Public Agenda observed that education leaders can be categorized as either “copers” or “transformers.” Jean Johnson, who heads up the organization’s education team, said both groups talked about the importance of instructional leadership. But transformers actually did it while copers merely talked about it. “The transformers knew teachers, knew kids, knew what they needed, and were on top of it,” she said. “Copers,” she said, “never got to it. You’d hear the phrase, ‘I was headed to the classroom, and then something happened.’”

Those hiring principals, Johnson said, should “look for people who talk like transformers. I would head away from people making excuses.”

### CREATING SYSTEMS TO PLACE A QUALITY PRINCIPAL IN EVERY SCHOOL

For all of the insights that emerged in the conference concerning state policies, effective leadership training and the challenges of reforming university programs, states are only beginning to put together coherent systems that reliably achieve the goal of placing an appropriate, well-trained principal in every school. Unlike the U.S., some of the nation’s economic competitors have been able to create systems of leadership development designed to support good teachers, Darling-Hammond told the gathering. In the U.S. leaders are likely to experi-

ence what she called “random acts of professional development and workshops, not tightly linked to instruction.” In other countries, teachers and principals have more time to work with one another to improve. In the U.S., too often, principals and teachers continue to work in isolation.

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*“The school system used to have a culture of excuses and we’ve tried to replace it with a culture of accountability and performance.”*

— NYC Mayor Bloomberg

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What might such a highly organized system of leadership selection and development include in actual practice? One model can be found

in Singapore, the tiny island nation at the tip of the Malay Peninsula whose eighth graders in 1995, 1999, and 2003 scored higher than those of any other nation on the test known as the Trends in Math and Science Study, or TIMSS. Teachers in Singapore can pursue one of three career tracks: they can remain in the classroom and become highly skilled and compensated master teachers; they can become specialists, such as counselors or content area specialists; or they can decide to pursue the leadership track. In order to advance in any of these directions, however, teachers must be highly rated by the principal of the school where they work.

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<sup>4</sup> “Preliminary findings from ‘A Mission of the Heart: What Does it Take to Transform a School?’”, prepared for the Wallace Foundation by Public Agenda. October 2007.

If selected to pursue the leadership track, teachers receive free, approved training from the National Institute of Education while continuing to earn a salary. They will then go through a series of postings in schools and in the Ministry of Education to give them a broad understanding of the education system and its policies. Only those who succeed at these postings continue to advance, much as is done in the U.S. military.

Of course, the usual caveats about such international comparisons apply. Singapore serves fewer students than the schools in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago or Dade County. The government of Singapore is authoritarian and education decisions are made centrally, in contrast to the localism that marks U.S. public education. Nonetheless, it is instructive that Singapore does a number of important things discussed at the conference: select the best candidates for leadership; provide rigorous, relevant training; and offer a career path along which they receive plenty of relevant experience.

Some states — many with Wallace’s support and some without — are moving in this direction of a more aligned system of leadership training.

Mississippi, not often cited as an educational model, is one such state. It closed down university training programs that didn’t include certain programmatic standards, supported the creation of a leadership program at Delta State University cited as exemplary by Darling-Hammond and her Stanford colleagues in their newly-published research, launched a state-wide leadership academy that puts on three-day professional development workshops, and gives qualified teachers a year-long, fully paid sabbatical so that they can enroll full-time in a leadership preparation program. When asked, principals in Mississippi give the state high marks for preparing them to be instructional leaders. Given that Mississippi students score far below national averages by most measures, however, it’s clear that leadership isn’t the entire answer to education problems. But, as many at the conference said, it has to be an element in reform efforts if they are to succeed.

School districts including Springfield, Massachusetts, Boston, Jefferson County (KY), Atlanta and others already have made leadership development a centerpiece of their reform agendas and have begun to train school principals themselves rather than relying on university programs. Such efforts can be shortlived, however, without ongoing financial resources and political support.

#### **USING LEADERSHIP TO TRANSFORM URBAN DISTRICTS – THE CASE OF NEW YORK CITY**

New York City, the site of the Wallace conference, is also a prime example of an urban district that has placed a big bet on leadership. The focus on education starts at the top: with Mayor Bloomberg, who has staked his reputation on school improvement, and with the city’s Schools Chancellor, Joel Klein.

In his remarks, Bloomberg said the district had cut bureaucracy by \$270 million, raised teacher salaries, replaced unqualified teachers, and given low-performing students more time in class. The school system, he said, used to have a “culture of excuses and we’ve tried to replace it with a culture of accountability and performance.” Four years ago,

the district launched the NYC Leadership Academy with support from Wallace, the Broad Foundation and others.

Klein, in a colloquy with Gene I. Maeroff, a senior fellow of the Hechinger Institute on Education and The Media, said he has spent three years bringing coherence to the city's school system. The district has also given the city's schools and its leaders greater independence while imposing on them greater accountability. Principals working in low performing schools that make enough progress to satisfy the demands of the federal No Child Left Behind act can earn up to \$200,000 in salary, \$50,000 of that in incentive and bonus pay. Those that don't succeed can eventually find themselves out of a job.

The combination of greater autonomy and higher pay, Klein told the conference, should attract a different type of principal. Instead of educators finishing out their careers as principals, Klein said he wants to hire leaders who are energetic and entrepreneurial and who both have a vision of where they want the school to go and are able to marshal the enthusiasm and skill of the faculty to take it there.

"My theory of education reform is that we have got to create the circumstances that attract the right people. It's a people business and so leadership matters," he said. To empower principals, he said, Klein gave them control of their budgets and access to school support organizations — some of which are part of the central office and some of which are not — to contract with. "One of the skill-sets I'm looking for is people who enjoy living outside their comfort zone," he said, echoing Rudy Crew. "That's where growth takes place."

This year, New York City began a controversial practice of giving each school a letter grade based in large part on how much progress students make. This has brought about surprises, and some shocks, for schools, their leaders and parents around the city. Some of the more popular schools in the city, ones that parents jump through hoops to get their children into, did not get top grades and that has renewed complaints that the city is moving too fast. Klein acknowledged those complaints. But he stands firmly behind the pressure that those letter grades place on schools and their leaders to drive improvement: "Kids need change. If we continue doing what we're doing or just doing a little more of it, I guarantee you we'll get the same results."

As Crew noted, smart, creative, skilled leaders will not want to work in a system that seeks only incremental improvement. "I have to redefine this problem with enough edge so that strong-minded thinkers will want to fix it," he said. "We're asking people not just to paint by numbers but to use their native intelligence, understanding of communities, understanding of individuals, understanding of power and resources to assemble that which does not now exist." That's a bold assignment and completing it risks opposition. But as Valerie Woodruff, the state schools chief in Delaware said, "Let's stop the nonsense here and do what we need to do."

## **THE CHALLENGE AHEAD**

With all that's now known about the importance of leadership, and with all the models of well-documented effective practices that are out there, could the pace of progress be quicker?



Gene Wilhoit, the executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, said other, more concrete, investments such as reducing class size or hiking teacher pay remain “bigger draws” for legislators than improving leadership. But, he said, “if states don’t invest” in improving leadership “we’ll be sitting around for five more years talking about what could be done if there were more money.”

Gov. Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas said educational leadership cannot be limited only to schools or school districts. “We need public officials to educate our people about the reality we’re all talking about, which is that if we don’t have good schools we’ll be facing an economic crisis.” That task should fall on the shoulders of all leaders from the president on down, she said.

What came through strongly at the conference was a collective sense that finding creative, effective, inspiring leaders to create an environment supportive of better teaching and learning is a must. Still, despite the promising activities in many states and districts around the country, the emphasis on improving leadership has not yet produced broad gains in student achievement. The practical challenges and obstacles remain formidable. But there is reason to be optimistic. Over the past eight years, leadership has come out of almost nowhere to become an issue that is now seen as “a bridge to school reform,” capable of linking all other reform strategies. Kenneth Leithwood of the University of

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*“Over the past eight years, leadership has come out of almost nowhere to become an issue that is now seen as ‘a bridge to school reform,’ capable of linking all other reform strategies.”*

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Toronto, a prominent scholar of leadership, said during the conference that “we are living in the golden age of leadership.” Kati Haycock also sounded an optimistic note: “When we really focus on something as a country, the fact of the matter is that we make progress.”

Haycock said the achievement gap that educators and political leaders talk so much about cannot be narrowed, let alone closed, without strong leaders who believe in students’ potential. Successful school leaders, she said, focus relentlessly on “the things they can change, not on the things that they can’t,” and they back up rhetoric with action. She cited a number of schools where leaders — not superheroes but real people who truly believe in, and demand, success for all kids — were making a real difference in the learning of children.

This can-do dimension of leadership isn’t all it takes, of course. But it was brought vividly to life for conference participants as recent graduates of the NYC Leadership Academy were seated at each table during the first-night dinner and told stirring stories of the challenges they now face as new principals in some of the city’s toughest schools. One of those principals was Qadir Dixon, who became the principal in July 2007 of the Renaissance Leadership Academy in Harlem, a notoriously problem-plagued school.

In November, barely a month after the Wallace conference, Dixon received some bad but hardly unexpected news: his school received an “F” on the city’s new system for grading performance. But as he told *The Amsterdam News* after he got the grade, he sees the “F” standing not for “failure,” but for “foundation,” a place from which to climb up and eventually succeed. As he said at the Wallace conference, Dixon was not looking for an easy challenge as a new principal. He had in fact sought out a tough school that needed his help.

Before taking his post in the fall of 2007, he spent the summer analyzing the school’s problems, even asking teachers to come in from their vacations to offer their ideas. In September, students were required to attend an assembly every day for a week to learn what was expected of them and to be instilled with pride in their school. Dixon launched new activities and electives in dance, art, cooking and music, and also began mentoring programs.

“Everyone told me that I did not want to take this school,” Dixon says. “But this was a challenge I was looking for. I like to get my hands dirty.”<sup>5</sup>

■ ■ ■

*Richard Lee Colvin, a long-time education journalist, is director of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media, the nation’s leading provider of professional development opportunities for print and broadcast journalists who cover education issues.*

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<sup>5</sup> Cyril “Josh” Barker, “Qadir Dixon: Putting the Pal Back in Principal,” *Amsterdam News*, Nov. 29, 2007

# Excellent Teachers Deserve Excellent Leaders<sup>1</sup>

By Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, Stanford University



The importance of education to the survival of individuals and societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has finally begun to be recognized by our political leaders. This is gratifying news. But we are all too familiar with the other shoe in this conversation: that while our children do learn, not all of them are learning as much or as well as we want and need them to do for the demands of the new century. We have a long way to go. But we have learned something about how to get there — including the substantial importance of the quality of teachers in this process.

In 1996, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future proposed what it called "*an audacious goal....By the year 2006, America will provide every student with what should be his or her educational birthright: access to competent, caring and qualified teaching.*"<sup>2</sup>

The Commission sounded a clarion call to place the issue of teaching quality squarely at the center of our nation's education reform agenda, arguing that without a sustained commitment to teachers' learning and the redesign of schools, the goal of dramatically enhancing school performance for all of America's children will remain unfulfilled.

Although we have not yet fully succeeded in this goal, we have made substantial headway on the teaching agenda. More than a decade later, the importance of teachers is widely acknowledged and many successful innovations in teacher recruitment, preparation, mentoring, and professional development have been launched. But unlike nations we consider peers or competitors, the U.S. has not yet been able to create a widespread system of support for high-quality teaching and learning that can provide top-flight education to all students.

To create these systems we need **educational leadership** at the school, district, state, and federal levels that understands how to create thoughtful, equitable approaches that support teaching and learning for students, teachers, and organizations. Indeed, the quality of school-level leaders (and specific practices they engage in) is second only to that of teachers in predicting student achievement. It is the work they do that enables teachers to be effective — as it is not just the traits that teachers bring, but their ability to use what they know in a high-functioning organization, that produces student success. And it is the leader who both recruits and retains high quality staff — indeed, the number one reason for teachers' decisions about whether to stay in a school is the quality of administrative support — and it is the leader who must develop this organization.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on remarks delivered by Professor Darling-Hammond at The Wallace Foundation's National Conference, "Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform," on October 22, 2007 in New York City.

<sup>2</sup> National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*, New York: 1996, p. vi.

As organizational experts like Deming and Senge<sup>3</sup> have shown us, organizational learning is created by developing and sharing knowledge widely among employees about the nature of the work and its outcomes, developing teams that can collaborate effectively, collecting and using information to inform decisions, and engaging in an ongoing learning process to be ever more diagnostic and responsive to clients and changing needs.

These experts are clear that organizational learning is undermined by punitive carrot-and-stick approaches that use data about outcomes to flog and punish employees while denying them access to the knowledge and skills they need to be effective or the decision making opportunities to evaluate what's going on and how to fix it.

Other nations are creating such teaching and learning systems as they have made enormous investments in education over the last 20 years and have left the U.S. further and further behind educationally. As a measure of the growing distance, the U.S. currently ranks 28<sup>th</sup>

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*“While our most advantaged students do as well as any in the world, low-income students and students of color are achieving at much lower levels.”*

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of 40 countries — on a par with Latvia — in math achievement on the recent PISA assessments<sup>4</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> of 40 in science, and 19<sup>th</sup> in reading achievement. And while the top-scoring nations — including previously low-achievers like Finland and South Korea — now graduate more than 95% of their students from high school, the U.S. is graduating about 70%, a figure that has been stagnant for a quarter century and, according to a recent

Educational Testing Service study, is now declining.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. has also dropped from 1<sup>st</sup> in the world in higher education participation to 13<sup>th</sup>,<sup>6</sup> as other countries make massive investments in their futures.

At the root of these concerns is the tremendous unevenness and inequality that characterizes education in America. While our most advantaged students in our most educationally supportive states do as well as any in the world, low-income students and students of color are achieving at much lower levels. For example, 13-year-old black and Hispanic students are reading at the level of white 9-year-olds, and the achievement gap has been growing rather

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. NY: Currency Doubleday, 1990; W.E. Deming, *Out of the Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), begun in 2000 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, focuses on 15-year-olds' capabilities in reading literacy, mathematics literacy, and science literacy.

<sup>5</sup> Paul E. Barton, *One-third of a nation: Rising dropout rates and declining opportunities*. Policy information report. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> J.A. Douglass, *The waning of America's higher education advantage*. Paper CSHE-9-06. Berkeley, CA: Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California at Berkeley, 2006.

than shrinking as inequality in funding has also grown. Schools serving large concentrations of “minority” students feature lower budgets, larger class sizes, lower quality curriculum, and less-qualified teachers and school leaders in most states across the nation. A major part of our effort has to be addressing the “educational debt” that has accumulated for these students in these communities.

By contrast, high-achieving nations fund schools equitably, with additional investments in those serving the neediest students. Furthermore, they make intensive, consistent investments in teacher and leader development. They provide strong pre-service preparation for educators — focused on how to meet the needs of a wide range of learners — and extensive professional learning and collaboration time throughout the school year.

### **ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

Recruiting great teachers is important, but it is not the whole answer. All of these systemic elements are needed to support the work of talented educators. We have many, many great people in our system of public education. As Ted Sizer once put it: “The people are better than the system.” It’s not the people who are at fault; it is the system that needs an overhaul.

So how do we build a system of schools that are organized for student success? Clearly educational leaders of a new kind are needed to do this work. These leaders need to be able to shape and support strong instruction, and they need to be able to develop organizations that are designed to support deep learning for teachers as well as students.

What do principals do when they engage in effective leadership practices? Recent research suggests that they:

1. Set direction, by developing a consensus around vision, goals, and direction;
2. Help individual teachers, through support, modeling, and supervision, and develop collective teacher capacity, through collaborative planning and professional development that creates shared norms of practice;
3. Redesign the organization to enable this learning and collaboration among staff (and personalization/support for students), as well as to engage families and community; and
4. Manage the organization by strategically allocating resources and support.

In addition, the kind of “transformational leadership” that fundamentally changes school organizations requires such participatory decision-making structures within and beyond the school.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Leithwood & D. Jantzi, *A Review of Transformational School Leadership Research 1996-2005*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Montreal, Canada, 2005; See also, Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2004. Available at: <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/wf/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/EducationLeadership/>

We looked for evidence of these practices in our recently-completed study of exemplary school leadership development programs, *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Programs*, sponsored by The Wallace Foundation.<sup>8</sup>

### PRINCIPAL LEARNING IN ACTION — THE STORY OF LESLIE MARKS

What does this kind of leadership look like in action? One of the principals we followed in our study of effective principal preparation programs was Leslie Marks, a principal who participated in the Educational Leadership Development Academy (ELDA) leadership development program in San Diego.

Leslie Marks experienced the full continuum of pre- and in-service development opportunities in San Diego, entering the first cohort of the ELDA Aspiring Leaders program in 2000 after more than ten years as an elementary bilingual teacher. At the conclusion of the ELDA program, Leslie assumed a position as vice principal at a low-performing elementary school while she participated in the first cohort of ELDA's Induction & Support program for early career site leaders. In 2002, Leslie was assigned to Tompkins Elementary School, a low-income, predominantly "minority" school requiring a major turnaround, where we met her.

In the three years she had been principal, the school's state Academic Performance Index had grown by more than 150 points, exceeding state and federal targets and far outstripping the performance of most schools serving similar students statewide. Equally important, the faculty had experienced major breakthroughs in practice and confidence which were obvious in our observations.

On one of the days we followed her, Marks was visiting 15 classrooms during her regular walk-throughs. As she entered a bustling 5th grade classroom, small clusters of students were working together to craft an outline of their social studies chapter. Leslie quietly watched the teacher review how to identify and summarize the main points in their text, and then observed as the students began working together on their task. She approached a group of students who appeared to be puzzling over their task and engaged them in discussion about what they knew about the reading and how they were determining what to emphasize. Afterward, she talked about what she saw in this class and each of the others in light of her vision for the school:

"As a school we've been looking at 'how do we really know kids get it,' and the only way that we really know is because they either talk about it or they write about it. If they're talking or they're writing, they're showing their understanding. And in the upper grade classes we went to, there were three different ways that (teachers) were looking at getting kids to explain their thinking. So, I'm kind of 'heartwarmed' about that."

With each class she visited, Leslie collected notes on the strengths and areas of need she identified during her observations. As she reflected on her instructional observations, she began

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson, Margaret Orr, and Carol Cohen, *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Programs*, Stanford, CA: Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007.

to think through the conversations she planned to have with specific teachers about what she had seen. She framed these planned conversations in terms of inquiry — asking teachers for their assessment of what was effective for students’ learning, their rationale for their strategies, and their views about how to improve. She also used her notes from these classroom visits to plan for grade-level and school-wide professional development focused on supporting student learning.

Teachers affirmed their sense of Leslie’s strong leadership. The vast majority agreed that the principal has communicated a vision of the school to all staff (94%), and is supportive and encouraging (85%). Staff say that Marks is “very effective” at encouraging professional collaboration (91%), works with staff to develop and attain curriculum standards (88%), encourages staff to use student evaluation results in planning curriculum and instruction (88%), and facilitates professional development for teachers (88%). Ninety-one percent say that she “stimulates me to think about what I am doing for my students;” 85% feel that she is “aware of my unique needs and expertise;” and 82% find her “a source of new ideas for my professional learning.” In addition, 84% of teachers report that the school now pays more attention to the needs of low-performing students, which is the focus of much of this effort.

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*“We have many, many great people in our system of public education. As Ted Sizer once put it: ‘The people are better than the system.’”*

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Teachers credited Leslie’s professional development work with improving their own practice. As one of the previously resistant staff members observed:

“In the last several years we have had heavy staff development. I have been resistant to some of it, but I have watched and seen and tried it on anyway and seeing things that work, I have given myself permission to look into it further. (In the past,) I used to say, “I’m not going to do that. It is not valuable.” Now I’m seeing that it is valuable.”

Marks described her preparation experience with the ELDA program as a critical influence on her current leadership. “(Before ELDA) I didn’t think that the principalship was anywhere (my vision) would have an outlet because the principals that I had known were not about instruction. . .I was just being freed when I came into the internship and got into this other part of this world that we would be...looking at instruction.”

Leslie described her overall experience in the program as “super powerful.” She pointed to the full-time internship as an influential component of the program, “because working side by side with someone for a year is incredible. I mean, all of those different situations that would come up...learning to be a problem-solver and thinking outside of the box. I would attribute so much of that to my mentor...I still think of what she would say when I make the decisions.”

Her philosophy and her preparation for this task were clearly evident in the work she did with teachers and students at Tompkins, illustrating vividly what instructional leadership looks like and how it can be developed.

Can this kind of leadership be taught? We found that it can be. Leslie Marks was part of one of the programs we studied that produced leaders who not only felt significantly better supported than other principals nationally but were significantly more likely to engage in practices known to be linked to school effectiveness and student achievement gains, and significantly more likely to say they will stay in the principalship (despite being in higher-need urban schools).

What did we find in these exemplary programs? Among the things they had in common were:

- Clear focus and values about leadership and learning around which the program is coherently organized;
- Standards-based curriculum emphasizing instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management;
- In pre-service programs, field-based internships with skilled supervision;
- Cohort groups that create opportunities for collaboration and teamwork in practice-oriented situations;
- Active instructional strategies that link theory and practice, such as problem-based learning, case methods, assignments that engage candidates in the work of instructional leadership (e.g. planning and delivering professional development);
- Proactive recruitment and selection of both candidates and faculty (including university-based instructors and practitioners); and
- Strong partnerships with schools and districts to support quality, field-based learning.

The successful in-service programs we studied used a wrap-around approach to provide a comprehensive set of supports for school leaders. They also integrated these supports with recruitment, evaluation, and supervision strategies focused on instructional improvement. Across the several urban districts we studied, these programs engaged in:

- Pro-active recruitment and selection from among instructional leaders;
- Evaluation and accountability focused on instructional leadership and school improvement;
- Supports through intensive principals' institutes and monthly conferences working directly on instruction and instructional leadership skills;
- Principals' networks and study groups pursuing specific topics, such as analyzing teaching; analyzing student work; designing professional development on particular instructional topics; developing peer coaching models, and much more;
- Coaching from instructional leaders, assistant superintendents and mentor principals.

Our research looked not only at individual exemplary programs and their outcomes for principals' practice, but also at the policy contexts within which programs operate at the state and local levels. Using a national principal survey and a set of state case studies, we found that states and districts have begun to develop policies that create these kinds



of opportunities on a more equitable systemic basis. We found that some of the most strategic state efforts:

- Use standards and accountability to guide and transform programs through licensure assessments and accreditation of programs.
- Provide fiscal support for principal recruitment and quality internships and mentoring through programs like the Mississippi’s Educator Sabbatical Program, North Carolina Principal Fellows Program, and Delaware’s mentoring program.
- Create a continuum of ongoing learning opportunities, by, for example: tying credential renewal to useful learning about how to develop and evaluate instruction (as in Connecticut and Delaware); providing induction supports for new principals; developing leadership academies that provide ongoing statewide or regional professional development; and creating approaches that integrate pre-service and in-service development along with instructional reforms at the local level.

Finally, while this work may be able to help us move beyond the idea of the leader primarily as charismatic hero — individually enacting miracles through force of will and superpowers — it is important to remember that public school educators are nonetheless heroes.<sup>9</sup>

Too often our nation looks for heroes in all the wrong places. Movie stars and rock musicians, athletes and models aren’t heroes, they’re celebrities. Heroes abound in public schools, a fact that doesn’t make the news.

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*“Too often our nation looks for heroes in all the wrong places. Heroes abound in public schools, a fact that doesn’t make the news.”*

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You want heroes?

For millions of kids, the hug they get from a teacher, counselor, or a principal is the only hug they will get that day because the nation is living through some of the most stressed parenting in history.

A Michigan principal tells the story of her attempt to rescue a badly abused little boy who doted on a stuffed animal on her desk—one that said “I love you!” He said he’d never been told that at home. This is all too frequent in today’s society, with two million abused and neglected children in the public schools, the only institution that takes them all in.

A principal I work closely with in a school Stanford University launched in East Palo Alto, CA, spent a recent week at the hospital with a young man who had been beaten up for traveling through the wrong gang turf and who has no parents available; ensuring that students with no health insurance get health care; helping to raise scholarship funds for the students who cannot afford to go to the colleges the school helps them get into; helping teachers

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<sup>9</sup> For this discussion of educators as heroes, the author would like to credit an unknown source who developed this theme and many of these examples, which were shared in an internet exchange.

improve their practice, and marshalling the efforts of parents, teachers, and students as they work together to turn around the legacy of failure that once allowed  $\frac{2}{3}$  of students to drop out and now sends more than 90% of graduates to college.

Visit almost any public school and you will see kids getting not only math, reading, science, and social studies, but also love, confidence, encouragement, someone to talk to, someone to listen, standards to live by. Nearly all teachers and principals provide upright examples, the faith and assurance of responsible and caring people.

They work for 50, 60, 70, 80 hours a week for much less than most could earn in the private sector in circumstances that are much more challenging. They strive to find the best in their students. They reach out to those who struggle and those who soar. They leave the world better than they found it each day. This, by the way, is also true of our superintendents and other leaders in the public education system.

They are, indeed, America's unsung heroes. Given how much this nation relies on the people of the front lines of our public schools, the least we can give them is all of the support we possibly can to do this extraordinarily difficult job.

■ ■ ■

*Linda Darling-Hammond is the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University where she has launched the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute and the School Redesign Network. She has written more than 300 publications, the latest of which is Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and downloadable for free at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).*

# Closing the Achievement Gap: Where Are We? What Are the Most Important Roles for Education Leaders?<sup>1</sup>

By Kati Haycock, President, Education Trust



## THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: WHAT THE DATA SHOW

Let's start by taking a look at where we are.

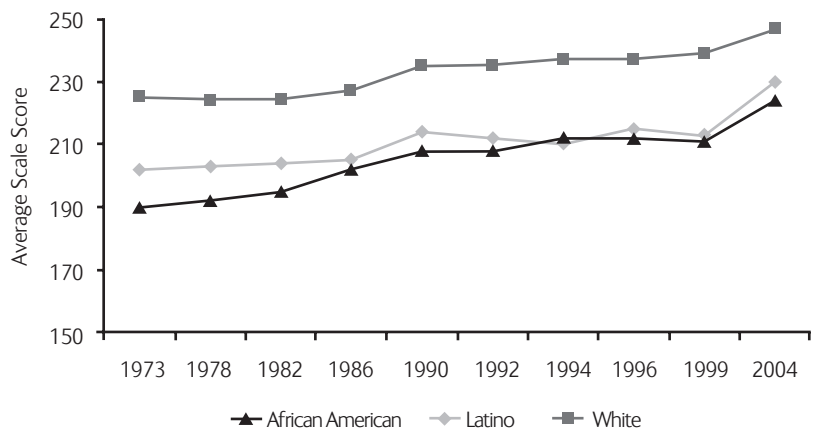
As many of you know, we made a lot of progress during the 70's and 80's in raising achievement, especially among low income kids, and kids of color. But all throughout the 1990's, the gaps between groups were stagnant or growing.

The good news is that this pattern has begun to turn around again. In the last five years there have been sharp improvements in reading for all groups of fourth graders. We now have record performance for all groups of children, and the smallest gaps separating black children from white children, and Latino children from white children, that we have ever had in this country's history.

There's good news, too, in fourth grade math: again, sharp improvements in the last five years for all groups of kids, record performance for all groups of kids, and the smallest gaps separating black and Latino children from white children, that we have ever had in this country's history.

When we move up to middle grades, the news is a little bit more mixed: a little improvement in eighth grade reading for black and Latino kids, but not much to write home about. Better news in mathematics, where again we're seeing improvements for all groups of kids and record performance for all groups of kids.

NAEP Math, 9 Year-Olds:  
Record Performance for All Groups



Note: Long-Term Trends NAEP  
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP 2004 Trends in Academic Progress

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on remarks delivered at The Wallace Foundation's National Conference, "Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform," in New York City on October 24, 2007.

Look in particular at the accomplishments possible because of a decade or more of effort in mathematics. Back in 1996, seven in ten African-American fourth graders performed at the Below Basic level, as did six in ten Latino fourth graders. Fast forward ten years, and those numbers are cut in half. Mean-

while, at the top end, African-Americans are five times as likely now to be proficient or advanced; for Latinos, three times as likely. That's a huge change.

If there is one message from all of this, it is that when we really focus on something as a country, we make progress. Indeed, if there's one message from our history it is this: when we focus on something, we make progress.

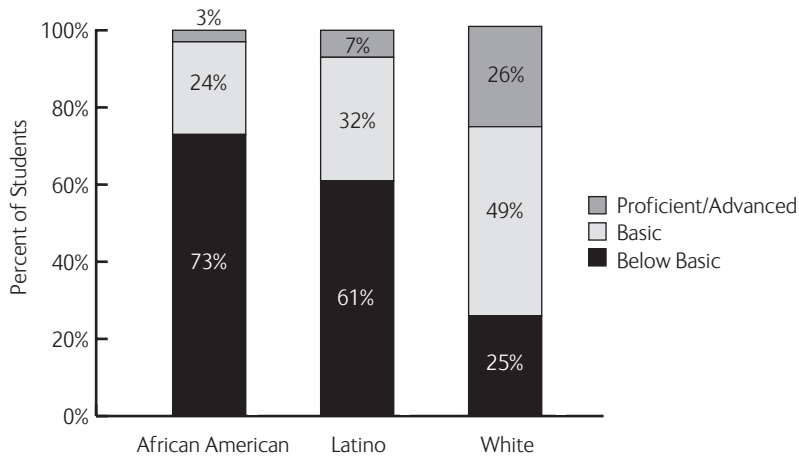
Now, in focusing on the progress in elementary and middle grades, I do not want to suggest that there is not a lot that remains to be done. Everybody today who is working at the high school level knows there are still an awful lot of kids entering high school who are not even close to having the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. But, at least we have some traction on those problems.

The same, unfortunately, is not yet true of results in our high schools. The bottom line in reading is really quite clear: our kids are exiting high school today with weaker skills than their counterparts had 20 years ago.

In mathematics, on the other hand, 12<sup>th</sup> grade achievement is trending upwards. In fact, kids are exiting high school with stronger skills in math than their counterparts had

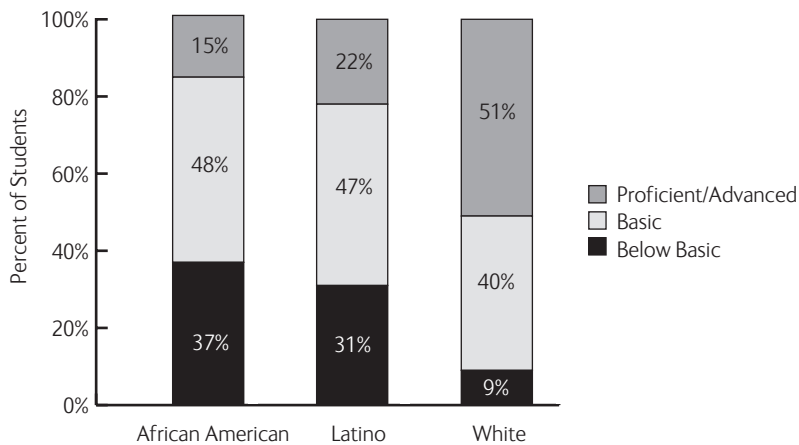
20 years ago. But, before you say, well, at least our high schools are getting better at something, it is very important for you to know that those improvements have occurred largely be-

1996 NAEP Grade 4 Math  
by Race/Ethnicity, Nation



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde/>

2007 NAEP Grade 4 Math  
by Race/Ethnicity, Nation



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde/>

cause students were entering high school with much stronger mathematics scores. Value-added in high school mathematics actually declined somewhat over the past decade.

So why are we making so much more progress in our elementary schools than we are in our high schools? Many high school educators, of course, think they know the answer. “It’s raging hormones,” they say. If it is primarily about hormones, though, you would expect to see the same pattern in other countries. Yet when you look closely at the international data, what you learn is that our students grow less during their secondary school years than in most other countries.

That’s why our students do relatively better in international comparisons of elementary students, than they do in the PISA<sup>2</sup> assessments of 15-year-olds. Indeed, the only place we rank high in current international comparisons is in the gaps between our highest and lowest achieving students.

### **UNDERSERVING THE UNDERSERVED**

So, let’s talk about those gaps. The gaps that are evident in the data, of course, begin before kids even arrive at the school door. Indeed, every year, there are countless children who arrive at school already behind. Sometimes that’s because of poverty, sometimes that’s because of language issues, sometimes that’s because of family issues. But regardless of the reason, a lot of kids arrive behind.

The question for us is: knowing that, how do we organize our education system in response? Sadly, what you learn when you look honestly at that question, is that rather than organizing our educational system in this country to ameliorate that problem, we actually organize the system to exacerbate this problem.

How do we do that? We take the kids who come to school with less and we turn around and give them less in school, too. Some of the “lesses,” it turns out, flow from choices that policy makers make, including the choice that many states have made to just plain spend less on schools serving concentrations of poor and minority kids than they do on schools serving concentrations of white and affluent kids. But many of the most devastating “lesses” in the education of poor children and children of color flow not from the choices that the policy makers make, but rather from the choices that we educators make. Choices about what to expect of whom. Choices about what to teach to whom. And, perhaps the most devastating choice of all, the choice of who teaches whom.

When you add up the effects of both sets of choices — both the choices that the policy makers make and the choices that we educators make — the results are simply devastating. The gap that separates poor kids from middle class kids and kids of color from white kids grows wider and wider, the longer they remain with us in school.

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<sup>2</sup> The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) compares student proficiency among 15-year-olds in the 30 member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, including the United States, and in some 27 less developed nations. The last reported scores were in 2003.

## **BREAKING THE CYCLE OF FAILURE WITH LEADERSHIP**

What can we do about all of this?

There are a fair number of people in this profession of ours who have basically decided that we can't do much about these gaps. When we show them the numbers and ask what is going on here, what do we hear? "What do you expect?" they say. "The children are poor, their parents somehow don't care, they come to school without an adequate breakfast, they don't have enough books at home, they don't have a place to study at home, they don't have a set of parents at home, they live in a poor neighborhood." A whole set of reasons, in other words, that are always about the kids and their families.

Our question back to them is a very simple one: if you are right, if things like poverty and difficult home circumstances actually make low achievement inevitable, how can it be that very poor kids and kids of color are performing so high in some places?

Let's look at some examples:

Ten years ago M. Hall Stanton Elementary in Philadelphia was the subject of a PBS documentary on the horrors of American urban public education. The kids are all African-American and most of them are really poor. About nine years ago a new principal arrived at that school named Barbara Adderly. Barbara saw the chaos, she saw the neighborhood. But unlike some of her predecessors, she did not think the school needed to stay this way. And, together with her teachers, they have turned this school into what I can only describe as a kind of joyous learning machine. This is not a school where kids sit in narrow rows at desks and fill in bubbles on standardized worksheets. This is a school that is rich in art and music. But, this is a school that is totally focused on teaching and learning. In their judgment they are in a race against the clock — and not, by the way, the No Child Left Behind clock. This is a clock that says to them, our kids come in so far behind we cannot waste a single minute. The school's data tell the story of their progress. The school's fourth graders are now performing higher than mostly white, mostly middle class Pennsylvania. They said these kids couldn't possibly achieve at this level, but they are.

Atlanta's Capitol View Elementary School is another school with a fabulous principal. This is a principal who said our kids don't need narrow, they need rich. So they became a Core Knowledge school. Again, this school serves all African-American kids, most of whom are very poor. But these children now perform among the highest in all of Georgia.

Frankford Elementary school in Frankford, Delaware is a school quite different from these. It's a rural school. Most in this school are children of agricultural workers. Ten or twelve years ago you look at the data on this school and it looked just like the higher education professors always project in their regression charts: lots of poor kids, not so good achievement. Again, these kids are now among the highest performing in the entire state.

Finally, welcome to Elmont Junior/Senior High School, in Elmont, NY. It's a school that serves about 2,000 kids, virtually all African-American and Latino. They, too, got a new

principal eight years ago, a gentleman by the name of Al Harper. Al tells an interesting story. He said, “when I walked up to the front door the first day on the job, I was greeted by my two assistant principals who said, ‘welcome, Mr. Harper, to one of the best minority high schools in the state of New York.’” And Al said, “as a black man I said to myself, ‘what does that mean? One of the best minority high schools in the state of New York. Why aren’t we one of the best high schools in the state of New York?’” And, that is in fact what they set out to do.

Al Harper is a fabulous leader. But the real leaders at Elmont are the department chairs. These teachers feel a deep sense of responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning that goes on in their department. Just to give you one example, when they get new teachers at Elmont, in addition to the observations that the principal and vice principal do, the department chairs do a minimum of eight, one-hour unscheduled observations per year.

Take a look now at their results: on the New York Regents English and math exams, this high school now is in the top five or six percent of all high schools in the entire state of New York.

Now a lot of people say, “OK, Kati, we know you Ed Trust folks have your high performing schools. But all of this washes out at the district level. Poor and minority kids perform about the same no matter where they go to school.”

That myth holds on, but it’s dead wrong.

One of the reasons we know that is that about seven years ago a group of big urban school systems decided to give their kids the same test — NAEP<sup>3</sup> third grade reading, eighth grade math. So we can look across those districts at the performance of the “same” group of kids and ask the question: does what districts do matter, or is it mostly just the kids?

Here’s what you learn when you look honestly at the data. By fourth grade, poor black children in New York and Charlotte read about two grade levels ahead of poor black children in Los Angeles. By eighth grade, they’re performing almost three years higher in math. And the same differences hold for Latinos.

Two or three grade levels are not minor, statistically interesting but meaningless distinctions. Those are big, life-shaping differences. Don’t ever let anybody tell you that what districts do doesn’t matter. Districts **do** matter. Indeed, no matter what level you work at — school level, district level, state level — what you do matters a lot.

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*“Leaders in high performing systems are not blind to the ravages of poverty. But they succeed by focusing on what they can do, not on the things that they can’t.”*

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<sup>3</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

## NARROWING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: LESSONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

So, what are the cross-cutting lessons from the places that are getting the job done? Let me suggest a few:

*1) The leaders who succeed with poor and minority kids focus on the things they can change, not on the things that they can't.*

As closing the achievement gap becomes a big issue, it often seems as if almost every school district in America is creating some kind of a commission on closing the achievement gap. So, what happens? In the first meeting everybody sits in a room and says, “what are all the things that might possibly be correlated with the achievement gap?” Then they make long lists of things that might somehow be related to the achievement gap, and somebody goes out and finds the relevant data. They collect numbers on things like the percentage of babies born at low birth weight, the percent of children born to single moms, the percent of children born to families receiving government assistance, the education levels of their mothers. Then they come back together and have all these charts, and what happens? They feel thoroughly depressed and totally frustrated.

The leaders in high performing systems don't do this. They're not blind to the ravages of poverty. But they succeed by focusing on what they can do, not on the things that they can't.

*2) Leaders in high performing schools and districts rarely talk or act like the ones you hear at big conferences.*

I go to conferences all the time and they always have this superstar principal: somebody who comes up and tells a story about how they turned this school around on the sheer force of their personality. Two things are scary about that. First, it makes everybody in the room who is a regular kind of person say, ‘if that's what it takes, I'm never going to be able to do this.’ The second thing is, it's just wrong.

When you meet the leaders in the places that are really getting the job done, they are not the kind of leaders that just turn things around by the sheer force of their personality. They are regular people. They are totally focused. They are totally relentless. But they are not these big outsized personalities and they are not the only leaders in their schools. Especially in the larger schools, the principals know that they can't get it all done themselves. Those are the places that improve. Leadership is not about one person, it's about building a shared commitment and building a leadership team.

*3) The leaders in high performing schools or districts don't leave much of anything about teaching and learning to chance.*

That means that they are always looking at their data and looking at it every which way. It also means that their data aren't just the usual pieces of data, not just test results in the aggregate, but also things like assignments and student work. They are always looking underneath the numbers. That's why for example, superintendents like Vicki Phillips, when she was in



Portland, didn't just look at the data and exhort teachers to get better. She knew that she had to look at data of a different kind. She had to get underneath instruction to look at the actual assignments that teachers were giving. Because it is the work that kids are asked to do that makes the difference. The leaders in these places that work for kids are methodical about all of this. When they expect something, they inspect it. Hugely important.

*4) Good leaders don't just mouth the mantra — "teachers are the most important thing, teachers matter a lot." They actually ACT like teachers matter.*

Research is unequivocal that there are big differences amongst our teachers in their ability to take kids from wherever they are when they enter a classroom and grow their knowledge and skills. Kids who have three strong teachers in a row literally soar, no matter what their family background. Kids who have even two weak teachers in a row never recover. So, teachers matter a lot.

But strong teachers are not evenly distributed no matter how you measure teacher quality. Poor and minority kids, for example, are considerably more likely than other children to be taught by teachers who never even studied the subjects they are teaching. The same thing is true when you look at brand new teachers. Poor and minority kids

are more than twice as likely to be taught by brand new teachers. Even in places like Tennessee, where we actually know who the strongest and weakest teachers are, African-American kids are more likely than other kids to be taught by that state's least effective teachers, and less likely to be taught by that state's most effective teachers. Yet when the kids don't do so well on tests, who do we blame? Them, their parents, their poverty.

Good leaders do not let this happen. They work very hard to extract, support and hold strong teachers. They make very sure that their strongest teachers aren't just teaching the high end kids, but are actually teaching the kids who most need them. And they chase out teachers they think are not good enough for their kids.

*5) Finally, a few words for those who are leading from outside of schools and districts: gutsy, good school and district leaders do not need you to go fuzzy on them.*

Good leaders need and use the leverage that ambitious policy and aggressive advocacy provide for them. If you are a principal in a high poverty school who is working to attract and stabilize a high-quality teacher force, you don't need your local community advocacy group to just pat you on the back. You need those parents to say, "we need strong teachers now!" Good leaders use leverage like that to move further, faster. Similarly, good urban school district leaders know that they don't need the federal government right now to say, "oh, we didn't

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mean for you to help your kids do basic reading and math, we'll give you lots of extra credit if the kids feel good about themselves, or if they attend school.”

I had a conversation recently with Michelle Rhee, the new chancellor of the Washington, DC schools, about this very subject. She wanted to know what was going on about the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. And I said, well, there are a lot of proposals on the table. Many of them involve introducing more measures of school progress. The core idea is that if the school is not doing so well in reading and math they could get points for having high attendance or doing some other thing. She said, “oh my God, I hope they don't do that.”

Now, understand the context. Michelle is running a school system where 60% of the schools are in some kind of improvement status. So, it would be very easy for this leader to say it would be really lovely for my schools to get a little extra credit for attendance, or extra credit for something else. But, that's not what she said. She said, “I want them to focus on making sure kids master those core academic skills. If congress does this, they'll cut the knees out from under me.”

So, those of you who are outside of the schools should remember that it may feel nice to just pat education leaders on the back. While God knows they sometimes need a pat on the back — and need your support to obtain more resources — the leaders who are really trying to drive change do not need you to back off. They need you to keep pushing because they use the leverage that your advocacy provides to move things further and faster for kids.

This job of closing the achievement gap is not an easy one. It is a very serious challenge and I know that there are people out there who are saying to educators everywhere, “It's unfair and it's undoable.”

Well, it may be unfair. If ours was a just nation, we wouldn't allow so many children to be trapped in poverty, and we wouldn't allow so many families to be without nutrition and healthcare.

But it is not undoable. Education transforms lives, and schools turn out to be very powerful agents. If we are going to really make a difference, we've got to use that power. We've got to harness our power and take kids from where ever they come from and go as far as we can get them. That's the job of leadership today. There is no more important work.

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