

*This paper was developed by the Washington Association of School Administrators following discussions with the Governor's office. It was shared with the Governor's office in October 2006.*

## **Increasing Student Academic Performance Leadership Matters**

Effective school and district leadership can be empirically defined. The Mid-continental Regional Education Laboratory (McREL) has conducted extensive research on the effectiveness of principals and superintendents in improving student achievement. The McREL research demonstrates that effective leaders know what do, when to do it and how to do it. The data show that effective principals and superintendents add more than one standard deviation in average student achievement. This increase means that on the average, students in schools and districts with effective leadership perform as much as two-grade levels higher than the national average.

Educating our children is a human process. It is the process of adults, teachers and staff interacting with each other on behalf of students (children) in an environment that does or does not maximize learning for students. This is a complex process of human dynamics where relationships become paramount. The high expectations and standards for student achievement that we have established in Washington State require that the process of educating our students must change and become more effective. One essential change in the process of teaching and learning is the transition from each teacher being responsible for his/her students only to a culture where all teachers feel responsible for all of the students in the school. This change requires high levels of collaboration and team work. It also requires learning communities where teachers, administrators and support staff learn together the strategies to effectively improve their practice with a direct outcome of increased student achievement. In most school districts in our state, this process is underway. But the degree of effectiveness from the most advanced districts to those emerging districts is significant. Leadership at both the district and school level is the most important variable in this process of continuous improvement.

Are effective leaders born or can reasonably talented people become effective leaders through a process of learning new skills and collaborating in learning communities focused on leadership? McREL's research clearly identifies a skills set that can be learned and applied. Jim Collin's work described in the best seller *Good to Great* indicates that attributes of a level-five leader can be obtained through a process of education.

Rather than discuss the skills and attributes described in McREL and Collin's work, this paper focuses on strategies for creating learning community opportunities for principals and superintendents in order to gain these skills. We know what the skills are. The steps needed in this process of continuous learning and improvement that best occur in learning communities is described by Peter Senge in his work *The Fifth Discipline* and Richard Dufour and others in several books, including *Whatever it Takes*. It should be noted that there are currently school districts, educational service districts, consortium of school districts and professional organizations engaged in leadership capacity building across the state, but often these pockets of quality work are limited in scope and participation.

To ensure that all or nearly all administrators, principals and superintendents have the preparation and continued opportunity to engage in a learning community focused on instructional leadership and student achievement, the following elements are necessary:

1. **The creation of a curriculum that is based on current best practices of instructional leadership and also develops skills that allow for system leaders to change and adjust quickly to a rapidly changing world.** Such a curriculum will be anchored by the McREL research as well as research in systems change in related fields. There are already districts and universities in the state that are to some degree developing such curricula. It would save many hours of work if a statewide curriculum incorporated the best work currently underway in the design process. Examples of large scale leadership curriculum development are the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA) and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).

The Michigan Association of School Administrators has developed a curriculum based on the McREL research and best practices. This work is based on seven curriculum strands: *Leadership, where it starts, how it grows; Systems Stability; Data Driven Decision Making; Relationships and Communications; Forging a Dynamic Learning System; Focus on Teaching and Learning; and Politics, everywhere influencing everything.* The Southern Regional Education Board has designed a series of leadership curriculum modules focused on building principals, which they are now using across the country.

One aspect of the curriculum will be continuous development; that is, the curriculum for instructional leadership must be in a state of evolution. It must grow and change as new information about teaching and learning, instructional leadership and organizational change and capacity building emerges.

2. **A delivery system will need to be designed that meets the needs of our geographically diverse state.** The educational service districts (ESDs), the Washington Association of School Administrators and the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP) are in a position to provide the backbone of the delivery system. In a continuous improvement model, the curriculum must be tiered and flexible. The delivery system must be able to deliver to both the high-density population of the Puget Sound and the rural areas of the state. This is the advantage of using the ESDs and associations; they are adept at meeting the needs of both. The use of technology to provide both distant learning and online options will allow the system to readily serve the needs of the most rural areas of the state.
3. **Organizing and creating effective, focused learning communities as a component of the delivery system will be essential to the success of developing a broad-based system of leadership growth and development.** While it is a relatively simple process to describe and define a learning community in operation, such communities are complex and dynamic. Establishing powerful learning communities will require careful planning and implementation. Learning communities that are poorly focused provide human interaction and engagement but do not produce increased academic performance for students. Without sustained planning and nurturing, communities soon dissolve. Professional learning communities need time and well-structured learning activities and projects to allow for the engagement and problem solving that sustain growth and skill development. The best leaders are often engaged in multiple learning communities simultaneously. Some they lead; others they are participants.

The ESDs and associations as the backbone of the delivery system must be ready to adapt the system as needed. Most importantly, they must assist districts to incorporate and adapt the concepts of professional learning communities within individual districts or a group of districts when appropriate. Districts must become adult learning communities that are focused on teaching and learning where all staff members are committed to continuous improvement of their practice. New strategies and skills offered by the ESDs' or associations' learning

communities are brought to the buildings by the superintendent, central office administrators, principals and assistant principals to engage the staff in thought-provoking experiences and problem solving that directly improves the quality of instruction in the school.

4. **Investment in a continuous improvement leadership process by the state will have a huge pay off in student academic achievement as demonstrated by the McREL research.** The investment by the state will be in both the development of the curriculum and assisting in the delivery system to provide the curriculum throughout the state. The development of the curriculum can be through a grant process from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). There are several possibilities for vendors, but the organizations with the most credibility among practitioners are WASA and AWSP. Together these organizations are in the best position to develop the curriculum and to assist in its implementation.

A delivery system beginning with the foundation provided in administrative certification programs in our institutions for higher learning and built on the backbone of the ESDs, WASA and AWSP needs to be established. Developing a cadre of well-trained facilitators that will operate out of the ESDs and associations will be the first step in establishing the delivery system. A state grant will initially support the first year personnel and training costs of the cadre members and will ensure the successful implementation of the curriculum.

Participation in the programs will be enhanced by the state providing financial assistance in the form of tuition scholarship to participants to help off-set the cost. Individual districts will also be expected to financially support the participation of their administrators. The cost of operating this system will need to be carefully calculated.

An additional incentive will be to incorporate the new state professional certification process for administrators as a component of the system. Participants will develop a personal plan based on the instructional leadership curriculum that when completed will meet the professional certification requirements.

## SUMMARY

**Creating a state instructional leadership curriculum, a delivery system based on learning communities through the ESDs, WASA and AWSP and providing financial resources to ensure the successful implementation of the process will place Washington in a leadership position that complements the Governor's vision for this state.** It will also ensure that our students have the best leadership possible.



**Paul Rosier, Executive Director**

**Washington Association of School Administrators**  
825 Fifth Avenue SE  
Olympia WA 98501  
(360) 943-5717