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Improving School Leadership

The Promise of Cohesive Leadership Systems

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Summary

Improving the nation's public schools is one of the highest priorities of America's federal, state, and local governments. Among the imperatives gaining attention in recent years is the need to develop school leaders who are capable of exercising more vigilance over instruction and developing an institutional culture that supports effective teaching practices. To catalyze improvements in student learning, many states have enacted new leadership standards for principals and revised criteria for leader training programs. Districts, too, have begun to pay more heed to their own human resource pipelines by establishing programs to train aspiring principals and to develop the skills of mid-career principals. Recent research supports these efforts by finding that the quality of the principal is, among school-based factors, second only to the quality of the teacher in contributing to what students learn in the classroom (Leithwood et al., 2004).

These achievements, however, are not likely to have their desired effect if new policies and initiatives are inconsistent with other state and district policies affecting school leadership. If, for example, new leadership standards are implemented by the state but fail to influence the curriculum of professional preparation programs, they will have only marginal impact. And if principals receive strong leadership training aligned with standards but find that they have little authority over their school budgets or hiring, they will not be able to put the best practices they have learned into effect at their schools.

The Wallace Foundation, which has focused its grantmaking in education primarily on school leadership, has long recognized the need for more-coordinated state and district policies in this area. The Foundation's grants to states and districts over the past nine years have been designed to overcome the isolation of targeted reforms and to forge policy connections that could lead to more-cohesive and high-performing systems. The working hypothesis, or theory of action, behind these investments is that a cohesive leadership system (CLS), defined as well-coordinated policies and initiatives across state agencies and between the state and its districts, will increase the ability of principals to improve instruction in their schools. In particular, the hypothesis holds that coordinating the development of leadership standards, high-quality training, and the conditions that affect principals' work (such as access to data and sufficient

resources) will facilitate successful school leadership and support improved teaching and student learning. The Foundation commissioned RAND to document the results of its initiative and in the process to examine this hypothesis.

Study Purpose and Approach

This study had three objectives:

1. To document the actions taken by Wallace Foundation grantees to create a more cohesive set of policies and initiatives to improve instructional leadership in schools
2. To describe how states and districts have worked together to forge more-cohesive policies and initiatives around school leadership
3. To examine the hypothesis that more-cohesive systems do in fact improve school leadership.

To document what the grantees at selected sites had accomplished, the RAND research team addressed three questions:

1. What policies and initiatives have states and districts pursued to improve school leadership?
2. How are the states and districts interacting to improve school leadership?
3. To what extent have they built cohesion among school leadership policies and initiatives?

To describe system development, we addressed several other questions, including, What strategies have sites used to build CLSs and why are some sites more cohesive than others? And how are sites attempting to scale up and sustain their work?

The third objective—examining The Wallace Foundation's hypothesis—proved to be a difficult analytic challenge. Linking improved cohesion with student outcomes was beyond the scope of this two-year project. We chose instead to focus on the link between the conditions within which principals work and their reports on (and satisfaction with) time spent on specific instructional practices.

We performed a cross-case analysis, using a purposive sample of 10 Wallace grantee sites consisting of 10 states and their 17 affiliated districts. Before conducting site visits, we reviewed the literature on system-building and policy coherence and developed an understanding of the indicators of cohesive systems that we used to structure, compare, and interpret our findings. We then conducted site visits during which we interviewed 300 representatives of districts, state government, and pre-service principal preparation programs. We also fielded a survey of more than 600 principals and collected information in an online log in which nearly 170 principals described how

they spent their time every day for two weeks. We supplemented this information by interviewing 100 principals.

Results

The study found that it is possible to build more-cohesive leadership systems and that such efforts appear to be a promising approach to developing school leaders engaged in improving instruction. Perhaps the most useful result of the analysis is our account of the strategies state and district actors have devised to build stronger working relationships and greater cohesion around policies and initiatives to improve education. By identifying those sites that had built more-cohesive systems, we were able to compare their strategies and historical contexts with those of sites that had not yet achieved fully cohesive systems. In this way, we were able to identify effective approaches to this work and local conditions that fostered success. These findings should be useful to others building statewide systems to improve education. Although we could not provide evidence that the full underlying theory behind the Wallace initiative is sound, we did find a correlation between improved conditions for principals and their engagement in instructional practices.

What Are States and Districts Doing to Improve School Leadership?

Policies and initiatives. All the study sites had done something to improve school leadership. Their efforts were focused on six areas: standards, pre-service and recruitment, licensure, evaluation, in-service, and the conditions in which principals work. The policies and initiatives differed across sites in their focus, scope, stage of implementation, and the degree to which they challenged the status quo. We found that states and districts were equally likely to be engaged in this work. We also found that state and district domains of responsibility were converging. For example, states we studied were mandating evaluation systems and professional development for principals, which used to be primarily the domain of districts. Conversely, districts were developing their own pre-service programs (on their own, in partnership with local universities, or in partnership with nontraditional providers), a domain once dominated by state government.

Roles and interactions. We observed two patterns of interaction across the sites. In one, districts were, for the most part, improving school leadership on their own, without support or intervention from the state. In the other, the state was clearly the leader, with districts involved in primarily reactive ways. Kentucky was an exception; there, the school district and the state were equal partners in improving school leadership at the district and state levels. In Kentucky, and in some other sites falling into one of the two patterns above, the state was adept at identifying, supporting, and spreading good practices that were developed at the district level.

Degree of cohesion. We use the term *cohesion* to describe systems built in concert by the state and its affiliated districts. We identified sites with more- and less-advanced CLSs so that we could determine which strategies and contexts seemed to be beneficial in this work. Our analysis of interview data indicated that three sites—Delaware, Iowa, and Kentucky—had the most advanced CLSs at the time of our research. Compared with other sites, they exhibited all five characteristics we identified as present in highly cohesive leadership systems: comprehensiveness in the scope of their initiatives, alignment of policies and practices, broad stakeholder engagement, agreement on how to improve leadership, and coordination achieved through strong leadership. We also determined that although districts and states were equally likely to be taking action to improve leadership, states tended to lead efforts to build CLSs.

How Have Sites Built Cohesive Leadership Systems?

States, rather than districts, have played the key role in creating connections among state and district policies and initiatives on leadership. State agencies are better positioned than districts to foster broad stakeholder engagement and agreement among stakeholders, coordinate initiatives, and ensure statewide alignment of resulting policies. Organizations with a statewide purview are also more aware of other education reforms and how leadership improvements can be integrated into the broader agenda. A comparison of lead organizations, strategies, and contextual factors highlighted some important differences among state efforts.

Organizations leading efforts. Sites differed a great deal in the organizations that assumed the lead role in developing cohesiveness. In some sites, it was the state education agency (SEA); in others, it was a university or a professional association; in still others, a large district was an equal partner in the work. There appeared to be no "best" approach: The appropriate constellation of actors depended on the local context, including who had the power, capacity, and inclination to move the work forward.

In the sites with more-cohesive systems (Delaware, Iowa, and Kentucky), the lead agency was chosen strategically. For example, state leaders assessed the internal capacity of their own SEAs, taking into account whether staff would be able to think and work outside the boundaries created by categorical federal programs and the overall credibility of the SEA and its political priorities. These sites proactively developed distributed systems of leadership with key roles assigned to different types of organizations, including SEAs, universities, leadership academies, professional associations, regional education offices, and districts.

Strategies used to build cohesion. Interview data suggested that eight strategies were the most important for building cohesion:

1. Building trust
2. Creating formal and informal networks
3. Fostering communications

4. Exerting pressure and influence
5. Promoting improved quality of leadership policies and initiatives
6. Building capacity for the work
7. Identifying strong individuals with political and social capital to lead the work
8. Connecting to other reform efforts.

The sites with the most-cohesive leadership systems shared several distinctive approaches to implementing these strategies. First, unlike other sites, they were pursuing all eight strategies and working more intensively than others on three strategies in particular: building organizational capacity to accomplish the work, identifying leaders with strong social and political capital, and connecting the efforts on leadership improvement to other reform efforts in the state. Leaders who can connect school leadership reforms with other education initiatives in their states help build sustainability for their efforts and may reduce burdens on districts and schools. Also, in Delaware, Iowa, and Kentucky, distributed leadership systems were built with key state-level organizations, as described above.

Second, leaders in these states pursued strategic communications. Delaware and Iowa routinely gathered key state and district leaders into the same room to both learn about leadership and develop policies and initiatives to improve it. Kentucky accomplished the same goals in a serial fashion by holding town hall meetings throughout the state that were credited with creating "learning systems for leadership."

Third, all three sites combined pressure tactics and support in effective ways. In Kentucky, for example, to create an incentive for all higher education institutions to engage in pre-service redesign, Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) and the Department of Education sought approval from the State Board of Education to design their own program, applying pressure that succeeded in making the universities more active partners in the process. But Kentucky did not rely on pressure alone: CLS leaders also offered support for the redesign process in a number of ways.

Contextual factors that promoted or hindered the work. Interviewees reported a range of factors that enabled or inhibited efforts to build cohesion:

Enabling factors

- Common structures and policies
- A history of collaboration
- Strong preexisting social networks
- Participation of nontraditional actors
- Funding and technical assistance from The Wallace Foundation
- Political support
- Supportive, stable, and aligned superintendents and school boards

Inhibiting factors

- Limited resources
- Limited SEA capacity
- Turnover of key staff
- Too many organizations, too far apart
- Cultures of independence
- Discord across organizations
- Reform overload

Sites with the strongest record in building cohesion shared a number of enabling factors and were less limited by inhibiting factors. Delaware and Iowa both had a history of relatively positive relationships among deeply networked state-level stakeholders, as well as a history of collaboration among them. Although Kentucky did not have a history of positive collaboration between state and district actors, the Wallace funding and technical assistance created the opportunity for leaders from the SEA and JCPS to work collaboratively.

These sites also enjoyed a higher and more consistent level of political support than other sites in our sample. All three states have a history of activism in education reform, and their political leaders have long shared a commitment to school reform which created fertile ground for leadership initiatives.

Finally, the three sites were collectively less likely to face some of the key barriers to building a cohesive system, such as staff turnover, a culture of independence, or discord across organizations. Other barriers, however, were present, including limited resources and SEA capacity, organizations that were geographically far apart, and, in the case of Kentucky, a history of discord across organizations. We found some evidence that these three sites were more resourceful than others in developing strategies to overcome contextual challenges such as limited SEA capacity and a history of discord. Less-cohesive sites showed more limited capacity—and perhaps more limited will—to overcome such obstacles.

Sustaining and scaling up the work. Our interviews suggested that in more-cohesive sites, the CLS initiative is likely to continue beyond the period of Foundation support. Although many interviewees described challenges to sustaining this work once funding and technical assistance ends—challenges such as insufficient time, staff, and resources and the eventual loss of dynamic leaders—they also described creative strategies they were adopting to sustain and build on their achievements, including passing legislation, embedding the initiative into their state's education agenda, and vesting future leadership of the initiative in organizations outside government to help shield it from political changes in SEAs.

Many interviewees felt that their success in creating cohesion provided in itself some assurance that the initiative would survive. In some states, leaders felt their efforts had reached the point of no return: They had established bonds among people and

agencies, a common language and vision, and widespread commitment to the goal of improving school leadership.

Did We Find Support for the CLS Hypothesis?

We were not able to determine whether more-cohesive systems were correlated with the ability of principals to spend more time on practices that are reported to be effective in improving the quality of instruction. However, we did find that principals reporting favorable conditions also reported that they spent more time on a series of instructional leadership practices. Our analysis does not provide evidence of causation—there could be other explanations for this correlation—nor can we demonstrate that principals spending more time on these practices has improved student learning. But our findings do offer some support for the theory that positive conditions for principals promote stronger instructional leadership.

Recommendations

Our study findings provide some practical lessons drawn from the experiences of the hundreds of people we interviewed. Although we focus on lessons learned about system-building to improve school leadership, our recommendations are intended to be helpful to anyone engaged in developing closer working relationships between states and districts that can result in better aligned policies for improving education.

Early Steps

Consider local contexts and address the challenges they pose. Our analysis showed that local context can work either for or against efforts to develop cohesion. Clearly, sites with a culture and history of collaboration and strong social networks are better suited for such efforts. A supportive political structure for public education reform is also important. We found that building cohesive systems under challenging conditions, such as limited resources, cultures of independence, or reform "burnout," was difficult. However, some sites found ways to surmount barriers. Other sites interested in emulating these reform efforts could closely examine their context and their capacity for them. In particular, they may want to address potential barriers before launching new reform efforts.

Identify strong lead organizations and individuals. Although lead agencies in the sites we studied varied, what the most advanced sites had in common—and what distinguished them from most others—was a strategic approach to the selection of people and organizations to lead the work. It is critical to find strong leaders who can form significant bases of power, garner political support for improving school leadership, and connect school leadership efforts to broader reform initiatives in the state. We recommend that sites determine which of their agencies or organizations is best poised

to lead the effort to develop a CLS. In particular, sites should question whether the SEA is the best choice for this role, factoring in its overall capacity and credibility and its willingness to think and work outside the boundaries created by categorical federal programs.

Capitalize on external funding and expertise. All of the sites we studied benefited from funding and technical assistance from The Wallace Foundation. However, we found that many of the sites also capitalized on diverse sources of funding, such as local foundations, both before and during the course of the Wallace funding. They also sought technical assistance from others; all of the sites engaged external organizations, such as the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and key experts in school leadership to help them develop their capacity to do this work. The sites also met with each other to discuss strategies for success. Although securing a level of funding similar to the amounts awarded to the Wallace grantees may be challenging, new sites could investigate local foundations and businesses as possible sources. Furthermore, the sites described in this monograph are willing to provide technical assistance and guidance to other sites embarking on this work. Prospective sites could also learn from engaging expert organizations such as The Wallace Foundation and SREB as they explore options for building more-cohesive leadership systems.

The Implementation Phase

Build trust and mend fences. Relationships between state and district actors are sometimes acrimonious. The sites we studied reported that certain approaches to building trust were useful; such approaches included acknowledging that the state and the districts were "in this together" and ensuring that state actors took the time to understand district contexts and to develop the capacity to provide useful technical assistance. A "fresh face" also had benefits: New state actors repaired previously broken relationships between district and state organizations. Sites may need to address possible trust issues before undertaking efforts to develop CLSs. Once trust has been established, it should be easier to develop common understandings, shared goals, and joint ownership of the work.

Engage a broad coalition of stakeholders. Building cohesion requires serious efforts to engage stakeholders and foster agreement. Engagement for coordination requires time and resources. Sites should recognize the importance of involving relevant stakeholders and giving them the authority to make decisions, thereby fostering buy-in. Key state and district leaders would also benefit from meeting in the same room to discuss leadership and to develop policies and initiatives for improving it.

Hone skills at applying pressure while providing support. The most successful sites in this study combined pressure with support. This strategy benefited both states and districts. Applying pressure was effective when people perceived the state as willing and able to exercise its powers, and offering support was effective only when state actors

and agencies could provide expertise that districts needed. Sites that can apply pressure while being supportive might accomplish the greatest policy reforms.

Recognize innovative districts as "lead learners." A number of innovative and sustainable policies and initiatives that began in the districts we studied spread to other districts and/or to state policy. States whose districts have made progress in improving school leadership should recognize these achievements and hold the districts up as possible models for others. State officials would benefit from partnering with such "lead learners" and creating mechanisms for scaling up relevant initiatives.

Connect school leadership efforts to standards and to other reforms in the state. Savvy leaders we interviewed knew how to link their efforts to build CLSs to other reforms in their states, such as high school and middle school reform programs. This approach helped to provide a platform from which to align policies and initiatives and appeared to foster both viability and sustainability. To bolster the success of leadership efforts, new sites could integrate leadership policies with other educational reforms in their districts and state.

Evaluation, Sustainment, and Expansion

Solidify programs and funding through legislation and regulations. Widespread and long-term reform was achieved through legislation and mandates that ensured that initiatives such as mentoring, evaluation systems, and the redesign of pre-service programs were implemented and funded. Other sites could include regulatory and funding designs in their efforts to build cohesion.

Engage in continuous learning and improvement. Leaders and organizations involved in building a CLS sought and shared expertise by participating in networks, attending conferences, and sharing ideas from research. They collected data to demonstrate that building a CLS had made a difference and to attract future funding. Other sites would benefit from similar commitments to continuous improvements.

Commit to engaging in this work over the long term. As many people told us, aligning policies and practices and building collaborative relationships between states and districts is hard work. Four of our study sites had been able to implement only a few initiatives despite receiving levels of funding and support similar to those of other, more successful sites. Even leaders in sites that have relatively advanced CLSs reported that only after nine years of effort were they beginning to see a real difference. Those who choose to embark on such an initiative should be prepared to engage in the work over the long term.

Final Thoughts

We found that it is possible to develop cohesive leadership systems between states and districts to improve school leadership, and we have identified the approaches that

appear most effective for developing such systems, as well as local conditions that create a favorable environment for this work. Although we did not attempt to prove the hypothesis that such systems improve student outcomes, we affirmed the link between principals' conditions and the time they spend on instructional leadership practices. It is our hope that this analysis will help guide other states and districts in working collaboratively toward the common goal of improving school leadership.