Research Brief

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Building Cohesive Systems to Improve School Leadership

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Abstract

RAND conducted a study to document efforts to build cohesive systems of state and district policies to improve school leadership. While all ten sites in the study had taken steps to improve school leadership, three sites achieved a higher level of cohesion than the others. Several strategies helped build cohesion, including identifying strong leaders, connecting leadership improvement to other reforms, conducting strategic communications, and combining pressure and support. The study offers recommendations to other sites seeking to build cohesive leadership systems.

Policymakers have begun to view leadership as a key factor in improving U.S. public schools. Research supports this view by finding that, among school-based factors, the quality of the principal is second only to teacher quality in contributing to student learning. Many states and districts have enacted new initiatives to help principals become strong instructional leaders. For these initiatives to be successful, however, they must be consistent with other state and district policies affecting school leadership so that principals have the authority and resources to apply the best practices they learn.

The Wallace Foundation has focused nine years of grantmaking on helping states and districts move beyond isolated reforms and forge policy connections that could lead to more cohesive, high-performing systems. The hypothesis behind their investments is that a *cohesive leadership system* (CLS)—one that spans state agencies and districts and consists of well-coordinated policies and initiatives addressing leadership standards, training, and the conditions principals face—will increase the capacity of principals to improve instruction in their schools. The Foundation commissioned RAND to document the results of its initiative and, while doing so, to examine this hypothesis.

RAND researchers conducted a study to document the actions taken by Foundation grantees to create more cohesive policies to improve instructional leadership, to describe how states and districts have worked together for this purpose, and to examine the hypothesis that more cohesive systems improve school leadership. The researchers reviewed the literature on system-building and policy coherence; conducted more than 400 interviews in ten sites located in Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, Oregon, and Rhode Island; and surveyed more than 600 principals from these locales. Each participating site included both state and district educational agencies. The researchers found that it is possible to build cohesive leadership systems and that doing so may be a promising approach to improving school leadership. Although they could not confirm the entire CLS hypothesis, they did find a correlation between improved conditions and principals' engagement in instructional leadership practices. Principals who reported that they had sufficient autonomy, access to data, useful professional development and evaluation systems, and adequate resources reported spending more time on instructional leadership practices and greater satisfaction with their ability to focus on these practices.

Sites Employed Several Mechanisms to Improve Leadership Systems

All of the sites had taken steps to improve school leadership. They focused on six policy areas, as shown in the table. The researchers found that states and districts were equally likely to be pursuing these policies and initiatives and that boundaries between what used to be the "state role" and the "district role" were blurring.

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States and Districts Pursued a Variety of Policies and Initiatives in Six Policy Areas

Standards	Setting statewide standards Updating standards Broadening positions addressed by standards
Pre-service and recruitment	Mandating program reform or closure Collaborative redesign of programs Alternative preparation programs Increasing interest and knowledge about principal position Targeted recruitment and succession planning
Licensure	Revising evaluation processes and tools
In-service	Professional development programs Coaches, mentors, and networks
Evaluation	Revising requirements for initial licensure and re-licensure
Conditions	Providing necessary data Providing sufficient autonomy Allocating resources according to student needs

Achieving a High Level of Cohesion

The researchers measured site-level cohesion using five dimensions: comprehensiveness in the scope of initiatives, alignment of policies and practices, broad stakeholder engagement, agreement on how to improve leadership, and coordination achieved through strong leadership. Three sites—Delaware, Iowa, and Kentucky—had the most advanced cohesive leadership systems at the time of the study. These sites had several advantages—including track records of collaboration, political support, low staff turnover, and strategic approaches to overcoming discord—which likely strengthened their efforts.

Eight Strategies Were Key to Building Cohesion

The interview data revealed eight strategies that helped build cohesion: developing trust; creating formal and informal networks; fostering communication; exerting pressure and influence; promoting improved quality of leadership policies and initiatives; building capacity; identifying strong leaders with political and social capital; and connecting to other reform efforts.

The sites with the most-cohesive leadership systems were more likely than others to employ a broad range of strategies, with a focus on identifying strong leaders and connecting the efforts to other reforms. These sites also distributed leadership among individuals from the various stakeholder agencies involved. Moreover, they skillfully employed a combination of pressure and support to further their agendas.

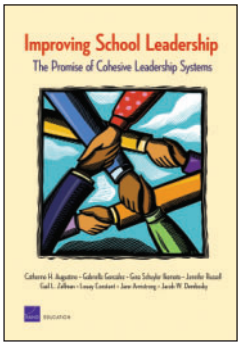
Recommendations for Sites Working Toward Cohesive Leadership Systems

Although the researchers were unable to conclude definitively that more cohesive systems were correlated with the principals' ability to spend more time on practices that improve instruction, the analysis does support the importance of improving the conditions faced by principals. Many of these conditions (e.g., data, resources, autonomy) require both state and district attention. Therefore, the researchers provide recommendations to strengthen relationships between states and districts to better align education policies that improve conditions for principals, thereby promoting instructional leadership. These recommendations can inform any endeavor to build a system within a state, not only for school leadership initiatives.

Identify strong lead organizations and individuals. The sites most successful in achieving cohesive leadership systems strategically selected strong leaders who could form significant bases of power, garner political support for improving school leadership, and connect such efforts to broader reform initiatives in the state. Those seeking to build cohesive leadership systems should consider which agency is best poised to lead the effort and question whether the state agency is the best choice, given its overall capacity and ability to work outside perceived boundaries.

Engage a broad coalition of stakeholders. Building cohesion requires substantial effort to engage stakeholders and foster agreement. Involving relevant stakeholders and giving them authority to make decisions is critical. Key state and district leaders would also benefit from regularly scheduled in-person meetings to discuss leadership and develop policies and initiatives to improve it.

Commit to engaging in this work over the long term. Aligning policies and practices and building more collaborative relationships between states and districts takes hard work. Four of the study sites achieved only limited success, despite similar levels of funding and support across sites. Even leaders in states with advanced cohesive leadership systems, such as Iowa, reported that the benefits took many years to materialize. Such experience suggests that new sites should be prepared to work over the long term and learn throughout the process to continually refine the efforts. ■



This research brief describes work done for RAND Education and documented in *Improving School Leadership: The Promise of Cohesive Leadership Systems*, by Catherine H. Augustine, Gabriella Gonzalez, Gina Schuyler Ikemoto, Jennifer Russell, Gail L. Zellman, Louay Constant, Jane Armstrong, and Jacob W. Dembosky, MG-885-WF (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG885/), 2009, 178 pp., $32, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4891-2. This research brief was written by Jennifer Li. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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