Iowa’s Cohesive Leadership System

Research tells us that among school-related influences, leadership is second only to teaching in determining what students do or do not learn in school. Over the past eight years, The Wallace Foundation has been working with 22 states and numerous districts to improve student achievement by strengthening education leadership. Drawing on lessons learned, the foundation developed a working hypothesis called the Cohesive Leadership System (CLS) — a systematic, coordinated approach to policies at the state and district levels that determines who leads, what they are expected to do, how they are trained, and the conditions in which they work. As Wallace’s 2006 Perspective paper Leadership for Learning explains, “The degree to which these policies are or are not well-aligned, in turn, ultimately influences the success of schools, their leaders, and leadership teams in improving student learning.”

As part of Wallace’s education leadership initiative, Iowa has made considerable progress in putting in place the essential CLS elements. After a three-year process of reviewing the research, field testing, and discussions with a diverse group of stakeholders, the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) were approved by the State Board of Education and the Board of Educational Examiners in December 2006. The ISSL were modeled after the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards, but were modified to include the results of additional research. The six standards and the accompanying 35 criteria serve as the basis for the state’s accreditation of higher education preparation programs, licensure, the content of the required mentoring and induction program for beginning administrators, principal and superintendent evaluation, and ongoing professional development. These critical components of Iowa’s CLS are described in greater detail below.

**Strengthening Preparation**

A national survey by Public Agenda found that 80 percent of superintendents and 69 percent of principals believe leadership training in graduate schools of education is out of touch with the current realities of the job. To strengthen school leader preparation, Iowa instituted a rigorous, independent review process for program accreditation. All higher education programs wishing to receive accreditation to prepare both principals and superintendents must demonstrate alignment between program content and the ISSL. The panel sends its findings to the director of the Iowa Department of Education, who forwards her recommendation to the State Board of Education for final approval. All programs are reviewed every five years to assess fidelity to the submitted programs and to assess effectiveness in preparing future school leaders.

**Iowa’s Mentoring and Induction Program for Beginning Administrators**

While strengthening school leader preparation is a good first step, ongoing training and support are critical in ensuring that leaders have the skills and capacities necessary to meet the demands of the job. This is particularly true for beginning administrators. To meet these needs, recently passed legislation requires all beginning administrators in Iowa to participate in a one-year mentoring and induction program, the content of which is tied to the ISSL. The program is intended to promote excellence in school leadership, increase the confidence of beginning administrators, help new leaders focus on improving classroom instruction and enhancing student achievement, build a supportive environment for school leaders, increase the retention of promising principals and superintendents, and promote their personal and professional well-being. Each local district is given the option of providing its own program, although a statewide program operated through the School Administrators of Iowa is the dominant mode of delivery. In this program, standards for mentor selection are clearly identified and mentor training and support are provided.

**Assessing Leader Effectiveness**

All principals and superintendents in Iowa are now required to be evaluated using the ISSL. The evaluation focuses on progress toward the goals in both an administrator's individualized professional growth plan and the building's and/or district's comprehensive school improvement plan. The first year of the evaluation cycle requires an administrator to demonstrate competence on the ISSL, upon completion of which the employing agency recommends the administrator for a standard license.

An administrator who holds a standard license must be evaluated at least once every three years on all six standards for pur-
poses of continuous improvement, continued competence in meeting the standards, and to determine if the administrator meets the goals of the individual professional development plan. In the intervening two years, all administrators are required to be evaluated based on a professional growth plan linked to the building and/or district improvement goals. Model principal and superintendent evaluation instruments have been developed that contain operating principles for best practice in evaluation, a suggested timeline, and the Iowa standards and criteria—supplemented with specific descriptors for both principals and superintendents. The evaluation instruments also include possible artifacts that can be presented to demonstrate competency, potential questions school board members can ask of superintendents to help guide the process, and model forms and templates.

Ongoing Professional Development

Ongoing professional development that is tied to relicensure is a key element of a CLS. Iowa issues a renewable administrator’s license that is valid for five years. In order to renew the license, the administrator must complete four units of professional development; two of those units come from required participation in “Evaluator Training,” which helps principals improve their teacher evaluation skills and helps superintendents improve their skills in evaluating principals.

In addition, a newly launched Iowa Leadership Academy was designed to improve leaders' performance on the ISSL. The Academy currently has three components: the previously referenced mentoring and induction program for beginning administrators, a principal center, and a superintendent/board center.

Systems Supports: Redefining Roles, Responsibilities and Authority

A key lesson from the Wallace education leadership initiative is that even the best trained and supported leaders cannot accomplish much unless the conditions that potentially undermine their effectiveness are remedied. There are a number of efforts underway in Iowa to redefine the roles, responsibilities, and authority not only of practicing principals and superintendents, but also of the extensive infrastructure that exists to support their work. Some examples include:

- Central Office Redesign: A first of its kind collaboration is currently underway among the eight largest districts in Iowa (which serve more than 20 percent of all of Iowa’s school children), aimed at redesigning the role of the central office to more directly support principals in their efforts to increase student achievement. This effort also includes the two rural districts that have received District in Need of Assistance designation.

- The Role of Intermediate Service Agencies: Iowa’s ten Area Education Agencies (AEAs) provide central office-like supports to local districts as they work to increase student achievement. This year will mark the third annual AEA leaders conference, a time when consultants and other personnel who work closely with local district leaders come together to address how to develop a coherent system of support and services for all schools.

- Redefining the Role of the Principal: There are currently 11 pilots of the School Administration Manager (SAM) process in Iowa. Results from this national study have confirmed that when traditional managerial responsibilities are taken from a building principal and assumed by a SAM, student achievement increases in statistically significant ways. Under such an arrangement, the building principal’s time is scheduled to work with individual teachers on improving their performance, with analyzing student achievement data, and with groups of teachers on system redesign.

- State Board of Education Supports: For the past six years, the Iowa State Board of Education has made support for quality leadership in schools one of its top three priorities. This priority is reflected in support for legislative measures and for policies developed, passed, and implemented at the State Board level. Additional support is provided through assistance in procuring substantial levels of funding both at the state level and through private sources for promotion of a cohesive leadership system in Iowa.

For more information about the leadership efforts underway in Iowa, please contact Dr. Troyce Fisher, Director of Wallace Educational Leadership Grant, at troyce@sai-iowa.org.

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