

EXCERPTED FROM HOW LEADERSHIP INFLUENCES STUDENT LEARNING DISTRICT-LEVEL STRATEGIC ACTIONS

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There are at least 12 common focuses of district-level strategic action identified in the literature on district efforts to improve student learning.

1. **District-wide sense of efficacy.** Superintendents and other district-level leaders in academically successful school districts convey a strong belief in the capacity of school system personnel to achieve high standards of learning for all students, and high standards of teaching and leadership from all instructional and support personnel. This is marked by a willingness to identify poor performance (student, teacher, school) and other obstacles to success, to accept responsibility and to seek solutions.
2. **District-wide focuses on student achievement and the quality of instruction.** Evidence of district-wide improvement and success for all categories of students and schools is more likely in districts that establish a clear focus on attaining high standards of student achievement (with explicit goals and targets for student performance). Academically successful districts also tend to emphasize instructional quality as one of the keys to improvement in student learning.
3. **Adoption and commitment to district-wide performance standards.** High performing districts pay serious attention to state-mandated standards for curriculum content, student achievement and school performance. The pervasiveness of the standards movement extends beyond curriculum, school and student results in some districts to other dimensions of reform efforts, such as standards for instruction, principal leadership and professional development (Togneri and Anderson, 2003). Standards are key features of district performance monitoring and accountability systems as described below.
4. **Development/adoption of district-wide curricula and approaches to instruction.** Lack of consistency in curriculum hinders sharing of experiences between classrooms and schools, makes it difficult for students transferring among schools and fragments district professional development efforts, all of which interfere with improvement in student learning. Effective districts typically make efforts to establish greater coherence in curriculum content and materials. The emphasis on curriculum coherence often extends to support for the use of specific instructional strategies said to work well with the content, learning outcomes and learners.
5. **Alignment of curriculum, teaching and learning materials and assessment with relevant standards.** The development or adoption of district-wide curricula and instructional materials takes place in the context of state/district standards for curriculum and learning. Alignment of curriculum at the school and district level with these standards, and with district and state assessment programs (standardized tests) is a major focus of attention.
6. **Multi-measure accountability systems and system-wide use of data to inform practice, to hold school and the district leaders accountable for results and to monitor progress.** Successful districts invest considerable resources in developing their capacity to assess the performance of students, teachers and schools, and to utilize these assessments to inform decision-making about needs and strategies for improvement and progress towards goals at the classroom, school and district levels. Commitment to data-informed decision-making linked to district standards translates into

supports for local educators to develop the capacity to use data and use it well (e.g., training, tools and consultants to help with data analysis, timely data feedback). In developing their accountability systems,

these districts often attempt to compensate for deficits in state accountability systems (e.g., insufficient data on student progress from year to year, narrow measures of school performance). Finally, the accountability systems are created not only to gather and provide information on student, teacher, school and district performance for planning, but also to hold educators at all levels of the system accountable for progress towards district and school goals aligned with the standards.

7. **Targeted and phased focuses of improvement.** Case studies of successful and improving districts reveal reform efforts that are system-wide in the sense of affecting all schools, teachers and students. Initially these efforts are typically targeted on specific curriculum content areas, such as reading, writing and mathematics, and support for reform typically begins in the elementary schools. Additional help is often targeted towards lower performing schools and classrooms. Analysts and practitioners emphasize the importance of having a concrete focus and goals for improvement embedded in the local learning milieu, and of sustaining this focus over a number of years in order to ensure that improvements have time to take hold and have an impact in the classroom over the long term.
8. **Investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district levels.** One of the hallmarks of districts that have succeeded in moving from low to high performing is an intensive long-term investment in developing instructional leadership capacity at the school and district levels. At the school level these efforts focus at least on principals. Togneri and Anderson (2003) and other researchers report that many successful districts favor in-house principal leadership development programs over the generic licensure-oriented principal training programs. District reform efforts often include the establishment of new school-based teacher leader positions (e.g., literacy coaches) to work with principals and with district consultants to provide professional development assistance (e.g., demonstrations, in-class coaching, school professional development, or PD, arrangements) to individual teachers and teams of teachers in the targeted focuses of reform. Professional development is also provided to teacher leaders in the content areas that local reforms focus on, as well as in change process strategies.
9. **District-wide job-embedded professional development focuses and supports for teachers.** Districts that believe that the quality of student learning is highly dependent on the quality of instruction organize themselves to support instructionally focused professional learning for teachers. These districts provide intensive off-campus and school-based professional development experiences for practicing teachers. Such experiences combine input from external and local experts, are focused on school and district priorities for improvement and are justified by evidence of need (e.g., student data). Learning experiences go beyond the workshop format to include such things as teacher intervisitations, demonstration lessons, in-class coaching and teams of teachers doing lesson study, curriculum planning and analysis of assessment data. Teacher development involves multi-year goals for instructional improvement (e.g., reading, mathematics) and increased school control over professional development (PD) decisions and resources in the context of district goals for improvement.
10. **District-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community.** Collegial work groups (e.g., grade level teams, school improvement teams), sharing of expertise, networking of teachers and principals across schools, cross-role leadership and school improvement teams at school

and district levels – all these and many other configurations of professional educators collaborating with one another on student achievement-focused district reform initiatives are indicative of a common emphasis on teamwork and professional community as one of the keys to continuous improvement. The literature is relatively silent about the participation of other stakeholder groups in reform planning and implementation. Togneri and Anderson (2003) highlight positive relations and collaboration between school boards and superintendents, and between teacher unions and district officials in some of the districts they studied, but not all. Several studies mention the role of business and civic leaders in pressuring and mobilizing the initiation of serious reforms, however, the participation of these external stakeholders is less well documented during the actual implementation of reform plans. The role of parents in district-wide reform is understudied and not well understood.

11. **New approaches to board-district and in district-school relations.** Togneri and Anderson (2003) associate more successful districts with school boards that have adopted a policy governance role that emphasizes policy development, goal and standards setting, strategic planning and monitoring of system/school progress in relation to district plans, priorities and accountability systems. Boards operating in this mode hold the superintendent responsible for implementation of system plans but avoid direct involvement in managing the school system. Stability in membership and constructive long-term relations with the district administration are also characteristic of these boards. School boards are often among the key instigators for reform and are instrumental in getting reform-minded superintendents into place. Most analysts of the contemporary role of school districts in education reform comment on the dynamic tension between district-wide goals for reform and the need for educators at the school-level to plan and organize in ways that fit the needs and characteristics of their specific contexts (Elmore and Burney, 1997; Marsh, 2002; Massell and Goertz, 2002; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2002; Togneri and Anderson, 2003). More-successful district reform initiatives decentralize considerable authority to schools to define student learning needs and to structure the use of professional development resources. The trick is for schools to do this in ways that do not fragment the coherence of overall reform efforts across the district. More research is needed to clarify the district policy and strategy dynamics that enable this bottom-up/top-down approach to reform.
12. **Strategic engagement with state reform policies and resources.** Educators at the district and school levels actively interpret external reform initiatives in light of their own beliefs, preferences and experiences, and they mobilize resources to fit local reform agendas (Spillane, 1996, 1998, 2002; Corcoran, Fuhrman, and Belcher, 2001). Successful districts more actively engage with the external policy and resource context in order to leverage those influences to strengthen support for the district reform initiatives, and to influence the external context in favor of the local reform agenda (Fuhrman and Elmore 1990; Spillane 1996; Togneri and Anderson, 2003).