

Instructional Leadership: The Experts' Views

As the Reform Support Network (RSN) was mapping the assistance it would offer Race to the Top grantees on building leadership for rigorous instruction, it gathered a group of experts in July 2012 to examine key competencies of instructional leaders given the key elements of education reform nationally, to prioritize critical levers along the human capital continuum to support the development of those key competencies, and to identify resources and supports for States to improve instructional leadership practices aligned to those key levers.

The experts included current and former officials from school districts, charter school networks and State education agencies (SEAs); New Leaders for New Schools; philanthropists who have focused their giving on improving instructional leadership; consultants in the field; and U.S. Department of Education staff who deal with instructional leadership.

Key Take-Aways

What do principals and other leaders need to know and be able to do to be effective?

- Great principals set and maintain high expectations for staff and students.
- Instructional leaders must develop the capacity to observe teaching practice and provide meaningful, actionable feedback about complex instructional topics. As leaders spend more time on instruction, those who oversee school systems must ensure that the time is spent in ways that clearly improve teaching practice.
- Instructional leaders do not have to be expert in every content area, but do need to have enough content expertise to coach beyond common misunderstandings. They must understand the instructional shifts required by college- and career-ready standards and possess coaching skills around those shifts.
- Instructional leaders need the time and skills to analyze data and use it in a meaningful way, both to guide school improvement and to help individual teachers to improve.
- Principals must be empowered to use their time appropriately. Distributed leadership has been empirically validated as highly correlated with improved student achievement.
- Research shows that teachers have increased confidence in principals who delegate leadership responsibilities to other school leaders.

What policy and practice levers can be used to build the capacity of instructional leaders?

The experts pointed to six areas of focus within the human capital continuum with the most potential to build leadership capacity and urged help for States and school districts in pursuing change in these areas:

- Principal evaluation
- Professional development
- Preparation programs
- Licensure and relicensure
- Performance management
- Roles and career pathways

Based on materials prepared by the RSN before the experts gathered, they identified several examples of promising practices in several of these priority areas:

Professional Development	Preparation Programs
Opportunities for principals to come together to talk deeply about their works and to network	State efforts in Illinois, Iowa, Georgia and Kentucky
Massachusetts' turnaround principal effort	Models of school districts served as consumers such as New York City
Performance Management and Evaluation	Roles and Career Pathways
School district efforts in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Hillsborough County, Florida	Kentucky's efforts on teacher leader licensure
Noble Street Charter Network's efforts	Examples such as the School Administration Manager Project and Oakland, California

Should the focus be both on principals and on other educators in leadership roles?

Pros:

- States are just realizing now that they should focus on principals; next will be teacher leaders.
- Two birds, one stone: Principals do not have enough capacity to do all that's being asked, so they need teacher leaders to ease the implementation burden. Teacher leaders create a human capital pipeline to the principalship.

Cons:

- The focus should be on principals, as there is more urgency for that work now, and they have the potential for the highest impact.

What can States and school districts (and partners) do to build needed leadership capacity?

Critical roles or mechanisms for districts/States:

- Clearly define the principal role (including distributing leadership) to inform job descriptions, evaluation frameworks and support provided.
- To be successful, instructional leadership must be endorsed by executive leadership as the center of the theory of action; expectations for how time is spent must be mirrored up and down the chain.
 - One idea: link career pathways and experience within the pathways to create criteria for instructional leaders that are accomplishment-based and not time-based (that is, a merit badge type system based on demonstrating key competencies).
- Create and utilize performance management systems that allow instructional leaders to be grouped based on performance, with differentiated supports that follow. This opens the door to executive conversation about the systems that are leading to the outcomes witnessed.

Challenges for School districts/States:

- School districts collect data in silos that could be shared in a dashboard or other solution, but the perceived cost is high.
- There may be constituent backlash over the use of money to support leadership based on a false choice of investments in the classroom as an alternative.

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