POLICY
SNAPSHOT

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What Do Effective District Leaders Do? Strategies for Evaluating District Leadership

In the wake of the Common Core State Standards and teacher evaluation reform, school leaders increasingly look to district leaders for support, coaching, and leadership. District leaders—superintendents, assistant or area superintendents, specialists, principal supervisors,[1] and school business administrators—can hold varying and multiple roles in the district. Reform of district leader evaluations has lagged behind that of teachers and principals, but creating evaluations that accurately reflect district leader responsibilities is of critical importance. Reform of district leader evaluations is an emerging issue, and the research and policy base needed to inform this effort is limited. That said, more organizations, including the National School Boards Association and the American Association of School Administrators, are increasingly investing resources to think more deeply about district evaluation, and new resources and research may be forthcoming. In addition, the strategies used and the lessons learned from states and districts that have already begun this work, as well as teacher and principal evaluation reform, can help inform states and districts that are just beginning to engage in this area of reform.

> ### Quote to Note
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> *"...both district and school leadership provides a critical bridge between most educational reform initiatives, and having those reforms make a genuine difference for students. Such leadership comes from many sources, not just superintendents and principals. But those in formal positions of authority in school systems are likely still the most influential."*
>
> (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 14)

In this Policy Snapshot, we explore district leadership evaluation in the context of state policy and provide information that governors, state legislatures, state boards of education, and state education agencies may wish to consider when designing and implementing evaluation systems for superintendents and other district leaders. We have divided this brief into two sections:

1. Defining effective district leadership: What do effective district leaders do?

2. Setting evaluation policies for district leaders: What strategies can states use?

This brief highlights existing evaluation policies as examples to illustrate the strategies in practice. We offer these examples to inform your state's policy and legislative deliberation, but we do not endorse any of the programs featured.

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[1] Principal supervisors are often, but not always, superintendents or deputy superintendents. A variety of titles may be used in the field to describe principal supervisors, and their roles may vary from district to district (Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios, 2013; Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, Hall, & Simon, 2013).
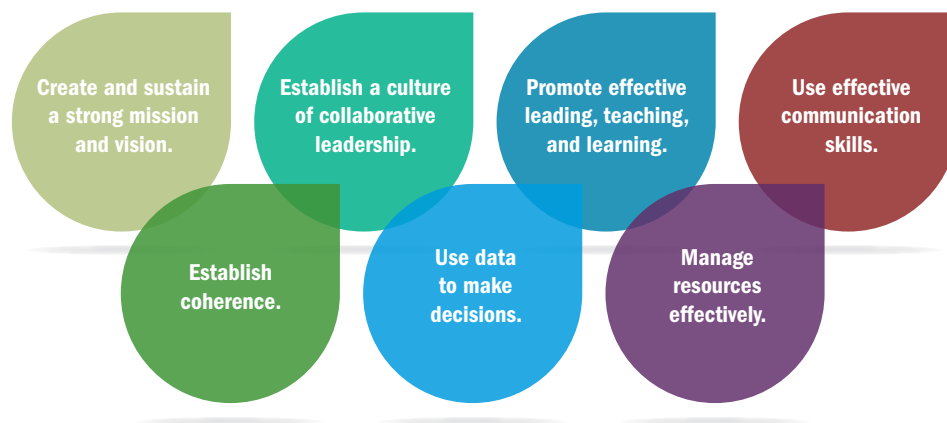
1. What Do Effective District Leaders Do?

District leaders promote student learning through their ability to provide instructional leadership support, plan strategically, communicate with all constituents, collaborate effectively with their staff, implement board policy, manage financial and human resources, and set the academic tone for the district (Callan & Levinson, 2010). Multiple qualities, characteristics, and skills define strong district leaders and their ability to fulfill these roles and responsibilities. Based on a review of current research and literature, GTL Center staff has categorized these qualities into seven domains that represent what district leaders do.

Figure 1. Seven Domains of Effective District Leadership

- Create and sustain a strong mission and vision.
- Establish a culture of collaborative leadership.
- Promote effective leading, teaching, and learning.
- Use effective communication skills.
- Establish coherence.
- Use data to make decisions.
- Manage resources effectively.

Create and sustain a strong mission and vision. Strong district leaders establish a strong mission and vision that guide the district's goals and initiatives. This mission and vision generally articulates a personal commitment to high expectations and academic learning for all students. Relative to mission and vision, district leaders do the following:

- Embrace the goals of "excellence and equity" for all students (Shannon, 2004, p. 14).
- Express a moral obligation to promote student learning for all students (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, Jr., 2000).
- Develop a sense of urgency to accomplish the mission and vision, and establish initiatives to support goals (Peterson, 2002).
- Bring together multiple stakeholders to work toward goals.
- Provide resources and initiatives that encourage equitable access to education, including initiatives focused on creating safe and supportive learning environments, providing professional learning for teachers, and helping students develop 21st century learning skills (DeBenedictis, 2012; Institute of Educational Leadership [IEL], 2001).

Establish a culture of collaborative leadership. District leaders must act to cultivate a collaborative culture of mutual respect, trust, and collegiality among staff (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). To implement this leadership style, district leaders should do the following:

- Hold themselves accountable for student success in order to motivate all stakeholders to accept responsibility for student success (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).
- Celebrate staff and student successes across the district and the community at large (DeBenedictis, 2012).
- Leverage staff skills and competencies to take on increased roles and responsibilities, and allow stakeholders to take ownership within their district (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).
- Work together with the local school board and building principals to balance district-level and school-level control (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Peterson, 2002).

Promote effective leading, teaching, and learning. Strong district leaders demonstrate the importance of effective leadership, teaching, and learning. To do this, district leaders need to ensure that they have high expectations and accountability for adults, coordinate and align curriculum and assessment, and coordinate and embed professional development (Shannon, 2004, p. 3). In that context, effective district leaders:

- Facilitate and engage in the improvement of the instructional program by establishing curriculum standards and setting curriculum monitoring procedures (Peterson, 2002).
- Organize the human resources needed to support the instructional program by providing instructional support materials and access to instructional technologies and by ensuring support for professional learning communities and job-embedded staff development (Peterson, 2002).
- Select, hire, and support staff (Peterson, 2002).
- Invest in coaching and developing school leaders who are also instructional leaders and who understand how to improve schools through effective teaching practice (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Use effective communication skills. District leaders should use strong communication skills to establish a shared vision and mission, clearly communicate staff roles and responsibilities, and demonstrate alignment of various initiatives to all stakeholders (Shannon, 2004). In addition, effective district leaders navigate the needs and concerns of individuals across stakeholder groups that may not always agree on district policies and initiatives (IEL, 2001).

Establish coherence. Strong district leaders possess the knowledge and skills to develop a system-wide improvement plan (Shannon, 2004). In particular, district leaders need to:

- Have a strong understanding of the federal, state, and local initiatives, rules, and regulations that impact their work at the district level (Callan & Levinson, 2010).

- Mediate federal, state, and local policy and align resources with identified district needs (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008).
- Anticipate change and fluctuation in their districts while persisting in their efforts to improve student achievement (Shannon, 2004).

Use data to make decisions. District leaders need to know how to develop efficient and effective data collection and analysis systems, use data to monitor results and inform district decision making, and share data in a timely fashion (Geier, Smith, & Tornow, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Data include student achievement results, teacher and principal evaluations, school-level administrative data, student perception data, school climate data, and analysis of the curriculum to align with student learning needs (Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006). District leaders also support school-level evidence use in a variety of ways, including by communicating information to school staff, supporting school-level analysis of evidence, communicating expectations that school staff use evidence, and providing professional learning opportunities related to data use (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012).

Manage resources effectively. District leaders need to strategically allocate resources to students with the highest need for support while also ensuring that resources are used to improve the quality of instruction and fulfill the district's mission and goals (IEL, 2001; Shannon, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006). District leaders should provide autonomy to school leaders to manage some critical resource areas at the local level (e.g., hiring and budget) while simultaneously providing appropriate oversight of activities. A strong district leader also collaborates with community members and other districts to access and manage district resources (DeBenedictis, 2012; SREB, 2010).

2. What Strategies Can States Use?

The following sections highlight potential state policy levers that can be used to evaluate district leaders.

Engage relevant stakeholders in the work. Engaging district leaders, unions, and associations in evaluation reform will promote awareness of the district leader's role and will help ensure that evaluation policies reflect the roles of district leaders. In addition, since school boards are often charged with evaluating superintendents, including board members in the development of standards and evaluation tools will be an effective way to strengthen board buy-in, collaboration, and alignment with the district's mission and vision. If multiple stakeholders are invested in the reform, it is more likely to have the support it needs during implementation.

Set performance standards and recognize that responsibilities may be distributed across roles. Performance standards articulate expectations for district leaders in clear language that can be assessed using multiple measures. These standards serve as the backbone of an evaluation framework and should reflect the desired competencies of district leaders. Bear in mind that district leaders hold various positions, and their responsibilities may differ significantly depending upon the demands of those positions. The role of a district business administrator, for example, differs substantially from that of a deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Consequently, not all performance standards will apply to all leaders.

Require, create, or enhance evaluation systems for district leaders. Evaluating district leaders strengthens the comprehensiveness of the state's educator evaluation system and provides district leaders with opportunities for evidence-based feedback and recognition. Policies should address "how, what, when, where, and by whom the process of performance evaluation is to be implemented" (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003, p. 63). District leaders should use performance standards to inform the design of an evaluation process and to ensure that policies reflect the aims and intentions of the evaluation system (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003). Common steps in the evaluation process include a self-assessment, a goal-setting process, collection of evidence through observations or artifact collection, a mid-year review with the evaluator, and a summative

Did you know?

Ohio was the first state to establish state standards for school treasurers and business managers (Ohio Department of Education, 2013). The *Ohio Standards for School Treasurers and School Business Managers* (five standards for school treasurers and six standards for school business managers) were written by a team composed of representatives from multiple organizations, including:

- Ohio Association of School Business Officials
- Ohio School Boards Association
- Ohio Educator Standards Board
- Ohio Department of Education
- Office of the Ohio Auditor of State

Source: http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Teaching/Educator-Equity/Ohio-s-Educator-Standards/Treasurers-Standards.pdf.aspx

RESOURCE TO NOTE:
ISLLC 2008 Educational Policy Standards

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards are high-level policy standards that reflect the wealth of new information and lessons learned about education leadership during the past decade. The ISLLC standards are often used to inform school administrator evaluation policies, but they may also be relevant to district leaders. Please note that these standards are currently under revision; a new version will be released later in 2014.

Source: http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2008/Educational_Leadership_Policy_Standards_2008.pdf

evaluation and conference with the evaluator. When designing an evaluation process, allow sufficient flexibility to account for the fact that not all performance standards will apply to all leaders. Provide guidance related to how districts can adapt tools to ensure that each district leader's evaluation reflects his or her individual roles and responsibilities.

State Spotlight

Massachusetts

In response to the educator evaluation regulation 603 CMR 35.00, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA ESE) developed the Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation, a comprehensive model system that includes a rubric and implementation guide for superintendents.

Standards. The superintendent rubric includes four performance standards:

- Instructional leadership
- Management and operations
- Family and community engagement
- Professional culture

Adapting for Multiple Roles. MA ESE also provides guidance on how districts might adapt the superintendent rubric to evaluate other administrators to better reflect varied job responsibilities:

- Identifying high-priority indicators and elements based on the administrator's role and responsibilities, professional practice, and student learning and district improvement goals
- Modifying, adding, or removing elements
- Adding additional indicators or modifying existing indicators
- Adding additional performance standards or modifying the standards (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2012)

Example of a modified rubric. The Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials (MASBO) modified the MA ESE Superintendent Rubric to better reflect the roles and responsibilities of school officials.

Evaluation Training. Recognizing the importance of training evaluators, the Massachusetts legislature passed Bill S.2315 (2012). This bill:

- Required training for evaluators and school teams
- Allocated $3.5 million for evaluator training
- Required districts to develop and submit training plans

Sources: http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/rubrics/
https://malegislature.gov/Bills/187/Senate/S2315

Include a variety of measures and evidence in evaluations. Generally, school boards are responsible for evaluating superintendents, and superintendents typically are responsible for evaluating district staff. District leaders interact with a variety of employees and stakeholders on a day-to-day basis. Including a 360-degree feedback process in evaluations can provide more detailed feedback on district leaders' performance based on the diverse perceptions of teachers, administrators, parents, colleagues, and, if applicable, school board members. Formal observations and other interactions, such as stakeholder meetings, strategic planning meetings, leadership meetings, staff evaluation conferences, interactions with stakeholders, and professional development trainings can also provide useful evidence of practice. A wide range of artifacts and data may be used to provide evidence of practice. In addition to measures of practice, outcomes measures, such as measures of student learning, should also be included in evaluations of district leaders. However, bear in mind that superintendent contributions to student learning are indirect.

Provide for training. High quality training on new evaluation systems is crucial to implementation. Key trainings include:

- District leadership training to inform leaders about state-level legislative and policy changes and help prepare districts for implementation by disseminating resources and tools
- Educator orientation training to prepare those educators for evaluation by providing them with an overview of the evaluation system and with more detailed information on the evaluation process
- Evaluator training to build and assess the skills and knowledge of evaluators through in-depth walkthroughs and practice using evaluation rubrics, collecting data, and opportunities for collaboration (Fetters, 2013)

States can help ensure that districts receive and provide sufficient evaluator training in a variety of ways, such as by requiring that evaluators be certified to conduct evaluations, requiring districts to submit training plans and provide training, and allocating funds for trainings. See the state spotlight for Massachusetts, above, for an example.

Develop a model district leader evaluation system. An alternative approach to a statewide evaluation system is the development of a model that can be adopted or modified by local districts. The model system provides the state and relevant stakeholders with opportunities to articulate priorities for district leader evaluation and can serve as a starting place for districts struggling to engage in this work. Unlike the statewide system, however, the model system enables districts to create or customize a community-specific system to fit their local contexts and needs. In the model, emphasize the importance of training and support for evaluators, and especially for school boards, which are often charged with evaluating their superintendents.

North Carolina

In 2007, the North Carolina State Board of Education adopted the North Carolina Standards for Superintendents. The standards focus on seven areas of practice:

- Strategic leadership

- Instructional leadership

- Cultural leadership

- Human resources leadership

- Managerial leadership

- External development leadership

- Micro-political leadership

Superintendent Evaluation. Following the adoption of the standards, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, in partnership with a vendor, developed, piloted, and validated the state's evaluation process for superintendents and central office staff. The evaluation process for the superintendent consists of a self-assessment, a meeting with the local school board, a consolidated performance assessment, the district school board rating of the superintendent, and the final evaluation and goal-setting meeting. A critical instrument in the evaluation process is a manual that includes a rubric used by superintendents as a self-assessment tool and by local school board members as a framework to complete the superintendent's performance assessment. The cumulative rubric aligns with the performance standards.

Instructional Central Office Staff. The same standards guide the evaluation process for instructional central office staff. The process is similar to that applied to superintendents, except that the superintendent serves as the evaluator instead of the district school board. The rubric used in instructional central office staff evaluations is different; accordingly, a separate evaluation manual is provided for these district leaders.

Sources: http://ncees.ncdpi.wikispaces.net/file/view/Superintendent%20Evaluation%20Process%20Manual.pdf
            http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/effectiveness-model/ncees/instruments/central-office-eval-manual.pdf
            http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/effectiveness-model/ncees/standards/superintendent-standards.pdf

Determine how evaluation results will be used. This policy snapshot has focused on evaluating district administrators; but it is important to recognize that evaluation is only one element of a larger human capital management system. When developing new evaluation systems, states and districts should determine and articulate how evaluation results will be used to inform other decisions, including those relative to compensation, career advancement, and professional development. In addition, results of district leader evaluations can be used to identify the pipelines that supply effective leaders, as well as the qualifications, experiences, and qualities to look for in district leader candidates.

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