



FOUNDATIONS POLICY SEMINAR

Educational Foundations Seminar
Boston, Massachusetts
September 29, 2005

PROCEEDINGS

"The question that many districts around the country are facing now is not whether district leaders should have a leadership role on instruction but how this can best be achieved."

—"From the Top: Superintendents on Instructional Leadership," Report of a national survey sponsored by Education Week.

The Education Alliance at Brown University

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NORTHEAST AND ISLANDS REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY (LAB)

The Education Alliance at Brown University is home to the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB), one of ten educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policymaking community.

The LAB develops educational products and services for school administrators, policymakers, teachers, and parents in New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Central to our efforts is a commitment to equity and excellence. Information about all Alliance programs and services is available by contacting:

The Education Alliance at Brown University
222 Richmond Street, Suite 300
Providence, RI 02903-4226

Phone: 800.521.9550
Fax: 401.421.7650
E-mail: info@alliance.brown.edu
Web: www.alliance.brown.edu



RMC Research Corporation is a LAB partner organization based in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

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I. Introduction

By most measures, public education in the United States is undergoing widespread and profound change. Most obvious have been the changes wrought by the 2001 education law, No Child Left Behind, which holds schools and districts accountable for reaching progressively higher student achievement targets. State and local education agencies are making sweeping changes in order to meet the need for broad and rapid school and district improvement.

To understand and document how states and districts in its region have carried out their responsibility to provide supports for school improvement, the LAB and its partner, RMC Research Corporation, of Portsmouth, NH, conducted a multi-year descriptive study. The study findings were discussed with state policy makers in an SEA policy seminar convened in March 2005. Building on that work, and recognizing the increased role philanthropic foundations are playing in public education, the LAB convened a seminar with representatives from a small number of foundations working in districts and schools, with the aim of sharing the LAB findings in the context of what the foundations are learning about supporting district leadership to improve public education.

Participating Organizations

American Institutes for Research	Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now
Annenberg Institute for School Reform	GE Foundation
AT&T Foundation	KnowledgeWorks Foundation
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation	Stupski Foundation
Center for Research on the Context of Teaching	The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Connecticut Center for School Change	Trefler Foundation
	William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

II. Meeting Description and Purpose

Designed to be interactive, the seminar discussion was organized around questions posed by two foundations. The questions were intended as springboards to dialogue among “critical friends” about district capacities, policies, rationales, and structures. The questions and ensuing conversation were preceded by brief presentations by Chris Dwyer of RMC Research and Jeff Archer, staff writer for *Education Week*. Dwyer summarized the LAB’s findings about state and district responses to NCLB in a set of seven themes that range from the global sense of urgency for reform all parties experience, to a renewed attention to teaching and learning, the “rediscovery of pedagogy.” The seven themes are reproduced on pages 4 and 5.

Archer discussed *Education Week’s* recent national survey of school superintendents. Broadly speaking, Archer found a “new center of gravity” among school superintendents: the trend is toward centralization, he said, even in districts with previously strong commitments to site-based leadership. This trend is especially strong in large urban districts, where student mobility is high and common curricula and programs help ensure that students do not lose educational ground with each move.

Although leaders of large urban districts have more faith in the district’s role in school reform than do leaders in smaller districts, more than three-quarters of all superintendents interviewed had played an active role in standardizing math and reading programs and textbooks; 92% had been active in creating common, district-wide curricula. Superintendents also reported taking part in new practices—walkthroughs, induction programs for new teachers, and common planning time—again, at rates in excess of 70%. Archer explained the increased superintendent activity by the intense pressures schools are under: “Superintendents can’t wait a few years to see which schools aren’t doing well.” The two most marked developments, he said, were the district-wide use of data analysis and periodic benchmark assessments.

The major barriers superintendents identified were primarily lack of money (89%), competing priorities (69%) and lack of district staff (61%). Given more money, he said, superintendents would buy common planning time, more advanced placement classes, and train more teacher-leaders (i.e., release teachers from classroom work to coach other teachers). Archer also discussed media coverage of school issues, which rarely places school issues in the larger contexts of educational reform or theories of change. This narrow focus, he said, helps obscure the public's understanding of educational change, masking both the fact and nature of change.

The full report is available at <http://www.brspoll.com/Reports/edweek-report.pdf>

III. Foundation Questions

Two questions set the stage for the day's discussions:

How do we ensure that district reform work results in building district capacity to ensure long-term, sustained improvement in teaching and learning in all classrooms? (Stupski Foundation).

How can we help district offices (and the people who staff them) re-conceptualize their role to provide the most effective support for identified schools? (KnowledgeWorks Foundation)

Both foundations have been engaged in urban district reform work, the Stupski Foundation as part of its original charge, and KnowledgeWorks as part of its evolution. Representatives of both the Stupski and KnowledgeWorks Foundations offered theories of action, captured in the schemas on pages 6 and 7.

Leadership in Complex Environments: Themes from Research

1. Tackling capacity

To meet the demands of NCLB, states and districts must make a significant shift in function from monitoring compliance to offering districts and schools strategic support with the same or sometimes diminished levels of resources. Limitations in their own capacity have hampered state and district efforts to design and implement policies, structures, and supports that will build local capacity for school improvement in the growing number of schools not meeting performance expectations.

2. Shifting Priorities

State and district leaders have shifted priorities to pay more attention and provide more resources to low-performing schools and districts. However, an emerging consensus suggests that persistently low-performing schools and districts may need not only more, but different, support. With limited resources, leaders are pressed to provide basic supports to all schools, sustain gains made in improving schools, and meet the unique needs of the lowest performing schools.

3. Aligning resources and policies

As states clarify their priorities to meet requirements associated with NCLB and related state and district policies, they are recognizing the need to align their entire education systems. Initially, states and districts layered new policies, responsibilities, and resources onto existing structures without considering their impact on the education system as a whole. Recognizing the limitations of past practices has required states to rethink underlying assumptions and align their actions and policies comprehensively—to see the continuum of schools, districts, and the state as a whole.

4. Centralizing control

The realignment of states' entire education systems has meant, at a practical level, an historic shift in decision making from schools and districts. In response to state pressure,

districts are striving to use resources effectively and efficiently to move unprecedented numbers of low-performing schools to higher student achievement and greater learning. Especially in large urban districts, district leaders are centralizing not only policies and support structures, but making decisions about the structure of the school day, curricula, assessments, and professional development. Emerging questions include when centralized control and standardized procedures make sense and whether they really address core problems of student learning.

5. Embracing adaptive change

Leaders initially responded to the demands of NCLB with technical solutions rooted in existing knowledge, strategies, and structures. These solutions provided an impetus for change, but the scope and complexity of the challenges confronting leaders are requiring them to move beyond existing frameworks and approaches. Using feedback from their initial and subsequent responses, they are continually adapting policies, structures, and practices to meet the demands for effective assistance to schools and districts identified as low performing.

6. Seizing Opportunities

Innovative structures, enhanced responsibilities, changes in roles, and new feedback mechanisms—these advances resulting from school improvement initiatives may have exacerbated tensions among leaders, but they have also opened up opportunities for new ways of working. Survival and success in environments that are characterized by adaptive changes require that leaders continually renew and extend their networks of relationships.

7. Zeroing in on instruction and learning

State and district leaders are finding that relying on formal planning processes as the primary engine for change often does not result in significant and adequate instructional improvement in low-performing schools. They are learning that in these schools, improvement requires direct attention to instructional practice.

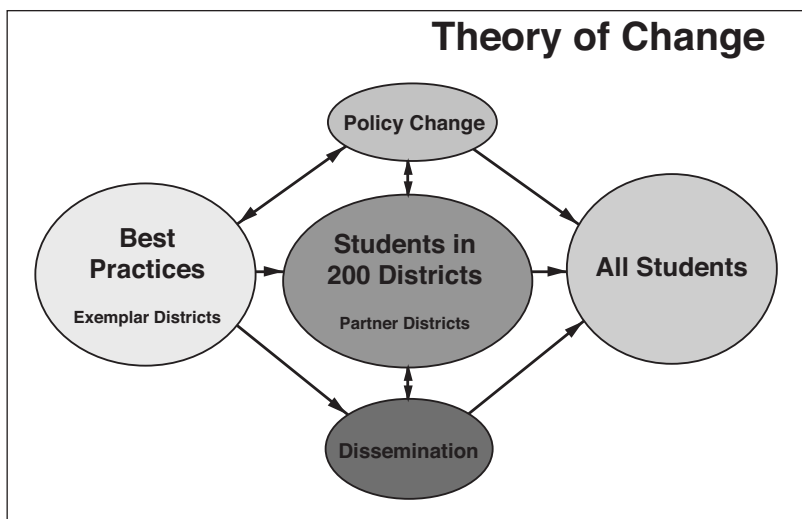


Figure 1: Stupski Foundation Theory of Change

This theory sees positive student change driven by best practices, drawn from exemplary districts (some of which Stupski Foundation sponsors as laboratory districts). As these practices are understood and adopted by districts (including the 200 districts Stupski plans to engage directly), policy makers, and the larger public, learning will improve for all children.

Small Stupski teams—including a program manager and a specialist in organizational development—work directly with districts to develop a partnership and a plan. Their aim is to discover new, faster, more efficient ways of moving change through an educational system. Leadership is a core feature of this theory; the Foundation has created leadership rubrics and other tools with the assumption that well-prepared leaders will drive improvements down to the classroom.

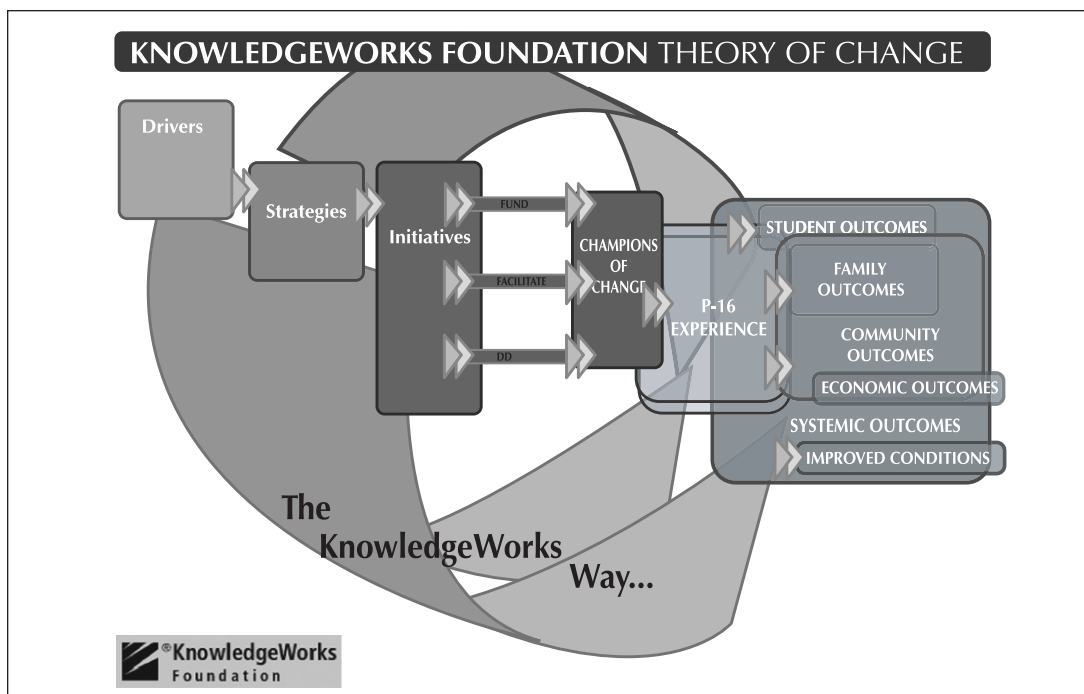


Figure 2: KnowledgeWorks Foundation Theory of Change

With extensive history in school improvement, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation is now moving into district work, focusing on three initiatives: school improvement, community involvement, and college and career access. Recently it has helped convert 18 large low-performing districts into 67 autonomous small schools and has created a state-level learning and management collaborative of representatives from unions and school boards, superintendents, government officials, state education personnel, etc. to advance the reform agenda. This collaborative is KnowledgeWorks' unique contribution; the foundation also stands by a list of "non-negotiables": customized on-site coaching, leadership development, statewide and regional professional development, data-driven decision-making, student engagement, and district support. District support, the representative conceded, presented the most trouble: educators desire real change, she asserted, but the system keeps getting in the way, stalling reform.

In response to the Foundations' questions, the ensuing discussion took shape around four topics.

1. District Capacity. Although widely used, capacity remains a stubbornly elusive term. Participants asked, "How do superintendents recognize the need to build capacity? What domains—data analysis or literacy, for example—should superintendents have some mastery of?" It was argued that energy for capacity development is limited by the extent of initial buy-in for change: without it, players, particularly nominal leaders such as principals, simply wait for initiatives to pass. Complicating matters have been broad layoffs of state personnel, as in Connecticut, where the layoff of some 4700 state workers created a striking loss of knowledge and capacity. Mentoring, networking, and developing communities of practice were raised as effective tactics to build district motivation and capacity.

Foundation representative:

"Capacity is a matter of three things: capability, incentives, and freedom of action. Too often we are focused on the first and are not explicit about motivation and freedom."

Education researcher:

"Our research is beginning to look at what a learning organization looks like. One question is how much capacity we can build for teachers to make good decisions about reaching their own students and own classrooms. If that's a vision for capacity, what does that mean for the principal's role, central office, the middle system—that's where curriculum support and ongoing teacher learning has to happen. That's where the system can make a difference. The system supports the on-the-ground learning."

Education researcher:

"The question is grain size. Leadership is important but for what? What is happening? Unless work is at classroom level, operating at high level won't affect classroom. I agree the district is the unit of change but the critical question is the connection between leadership, etc. and the quality of classroom teaching and learning."

Foundation representative:

“We support superintendents; our teams work through superintendents. It’s mostly background work—building capacity. Most recently, we are understanding that in some districts, that’s not enough. What are the other kinds of support for execution gaps? We need folks on the ground. Our work is highly contextual.”

2. Motivating Stakeholders. No one underestimates the difficulty of prompting large, inherently conservative bureaucracies to embrace change willingly. Prompting change was framed in terms of creating “districtwide buy-in,” “bringing the skill and will together,” and getting everyone “on the bus.” Motivation is by definition key to sustainability because change and growth have to continue beyond the work of a charismatic leader.

As one participant noted, common practices may be in place, consensus may be reached, but real engagement may still be missing. The participant described a “best practices council” where key teacher leaders from all schools in a district met monthly to inform district policy and practices. Another cautioned against simplistic notions and waiting to get everyone “on board” before moving; he called for multiple strategies. Still another declared that if districts begin with an effort to change attitudes or the culture they will never get started.

Foundation representative:

“There’s a need for collaboration—we talk a lot about that. We don’t talk a lot about isolation. In order to build long term capacity we have to find ways to break down the isolation. ... Everyone sees things from their vantage point. Maybe we’re better at the classroom level at forming professional communities; how do we do that on a broader scale?”

Education researcher:

“Motivation [is] at the heart of working with children; we want them to be highly motivated in what they’re learning. Educators do things at every level that cut motivation. Teachers’ plans are dashed. Every layer of the system cuts that motivation down. Then you don’t get ownership. We cut educators out.”

Education researcher:

"I don't think anyone knows the answer. Even struggling to answer it would take too long. In my experience as a superintendent, the superintendent articulates the what, the how, and the why in ways that others can understand it. So that when I wasn't in the room, they would still be driven by it. That there's clarity there—they have internalized and universalized a set of goals and the means by which to realize them."

Foundation representative:

"We used private money to move expert teachers into the lowest performing schools. They spent half their time sharing classroom teaching and the other half doing professional development. In two years we saw a turnaround. We spent \$10,000 per teacher. Now we're using that more widely. You also have to pay attention to differential pay."

3. Incorporating Feedback. Districts are grappling with a sea-change in role from supervision to service, and the need to seek and respond to feedback is new for many. Still, the absence or presence of feedback mechanisms makes a critical difference in how well districts fulfill their obligations. Examples of classroom-district disconnects included the numbers of district mandates, measured against teachers' time and capacity. In some instances where schools have made rapid and notable strides in improvement, reforms were undertaken without district involvement. Several participants noted that the extensive accountability expectations to which students and school personnel are held are not matched by equivalent accountability expectations for district—or state—personnel. Strategies may be implemented and enforced for years before they are examined for their utility, a participant observed.

Feedback-producing loops such as superintendent walkthroughs show some promise. Another kind of feedback cited was the use of systems, such as that in Edmonton, Canada, where schools purchase professional development from central services; this creates, in business terms, a "pull" system rather than a "push" system. Purchaser choice offers a kind of feedback.

Education researcher:

“How do you know what’s going on at the classroom level? Where’s the feedback loop?”

District administrator:

The reason for the central office is to assure equity, access, and coherence. Carrying out a Special Ed and ELL analysis made a huge difference in our district. . . We asked, ‘Why was the child referred?’ We learned from teachers that there was no other place, or they didn’t have the support to deal with the child. They wanted to know where the reciprocal accountability was: what could central office do? There is a real obligation to make change at the district level. The district doesn’t see the coherence. It doesn’t look at the root of problem.”

4. The Role of Foundations. As relatively new players in (pre-)K-12 education, foundations may still be getting their bearings. A participant observed that foundations run the risk of “capacity substitution” rather than “capacity building.” Foundation representatives with strong backgrounds as superintendents and other change agents themselves conceded that the temptation to step in and act—rather than coach—is strong.

As participants noted, foundations are not, ultimately, accountable for school successes. Thus, how do foundations hold themselves accountable? Further, their timelines may be shorter than those necessary for an intervention to have broad impact. That said, what kinds of support can foundations provide and to whom? Foundations could contribute significantly in developing tools for assessing educators’ performance as intermediate indicators of change.

Foundation representative:

“We see ourselves as contingently responsible. We work with the tension to have results faster than the community is demanding. Second, we are working against desire to do the work ourselves because all of us are former superintendents or held high level district positions.”

Education researcher:

“The incentives aren’t as clear to be a supporter as they are to be a trainer or teacher...People need explicit permission to be in the role.”

IV. Summary and Evaluation

Closing thoughts from the participants were characterized by a sense of invigoration inspired by the depth of work being undertaken at the district level, and tempered by a realization of the immense complexity of the work ahead. The conversation about superintendents as instructional leaders reminded one participant of earlier conversations about principals as instructional leaders: “We’ve heard this before at other levels.” Another said, “We keep going around between technical, cultural, and political challenges of this work, which are just huge.”

One foundation representative mentioned “the dog that didn’t bark”—the things unsaid, such as the role of state education departments. Observed an education researcher, “I’m struck by the number of times higher education hasn’t come into the school reform conversation.”

How to knit together the disparate pieces of the system, how to balance efforts to motivate all players with the need to act immediately on behalf of current students, and other issues were acknowledged as continuing tensions and proposed for future analysis and discussion.

The Education Alliance at Brown University

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB)

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Executive Director, The Education Alliance

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C. Patrick Proctor, Sr.

Robin D. Rapaport

Betty J. Sternberg

Lyonel B. Tracy



Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory

222 Richmond Street
Suite 300
Providence, RI 02903-4226

e-mail

info@alliance.brown.edu

web

www.alliance.brown.edu