

## Leading for Change, Interim School Superintendents, Mentoring New Leaders



### BY THE WALLACE FOUNDATION

*As part of its efforts to improve education leadership nationwide, [The Wallace Foundation](#) helped launch two distinctive programs at Harvard and the University of Virginia in 2006 to train education executives. More than 500 leaders from 12 Wallace-funded states, and districts within them, have participated. This article excerpts the [full report](#) produced by the Foundation describing these programs and some of the early experiences of leadership teams that have attended them.*

State and district leaders—superintendents and their teams, board members and agency heads—are several steps removed from classrooms. But their actions can, and do, profoundly affect whether children succeed. Such leaders, for example, can establish rigorous subject matter standards, curricula and student assessments – but those efforts can be largely negated if teachers don’t teach what standards and curricula prescribe and high-stakes tests measure.

There are few opportunities, however, for state and district leaders and their teams to come together to consider the intricacies of leadership, take stock of their own leadership abilities, and above all, think deeply and collectively about how state, district and school policies and actions can be better coordinated to focus everyone on the success of students, first and foremost.

Market research<sup>1</sup> indicates that many education leaders would welcome such opportunities. But the research also reveals concern about the likely price-tag and time commitment such programs might carry, some skepticism about their practical value and relevance, and questions about the feasibility of training for teams of leaders.

## **Harvard and University of Virginia Go Beyond One-Shot Training**

To be sure, leadership training programs for sitting superintendents do exist at some two dozen universities, superintendent membership organizations, for-profit companies or other providers, according to a recent national scan<sup>ii</sup>. But the majority of those programs offer fleeting, one-shot experiences, are generally not geared to team-building, and rarely draw on multiple perspectives from education, business or public policy faculty.

To help meet that need, Harvard University and the University of Virginia have each established an Executive Leadership Program for Educators<sup>iii</sup>, each with distinctive approaches, but each designed to provide participants with a deeper, more enduring leadership improvement experience than is the norm. Both universities already had well-established records of providing leadership training that drew on the expertise of education, business and public policy faculty<sup>iv</sup>. State and district-level leadership teams from 12 states that are taking part in The Wallace Foundation's education leadership initiative have participated in the Harvard and UVA programs<sup>v</sup>.

The core experience at both Harvard and UVA consists of five-day summer intensive programs on campus which participants attend for two consecutive years. Both employ classic adult learning techniques including case studies drawn largely from the education world, business and elsewhere to provoke conversation, self-examination, problem definition and role playing.

But the leader training doesn't end with the summer institutes. Both programs also provide in-state institutes during the year as well as continuous on-line support to participants. Harvard provides state and district leaders with expert, on-site coaching and UVA also offers technical assistance beyond the summer programs. As Delaware's Valerie Woodruff, who retired as state superintendent in January 2009, put it, "We didn't just go for a week, then go home, then come back next summer. We had meetings during the year where UVA folks came to Delaware and met with our teams again. What I loved was when districts began to ask, can we bring others to the meetings? This brought more people on board and thinking in new ways."

"Rather than being one-shot, we took the opportunity to design something that a lot of us have talked about over the years but have been unable to do: provide follow-up support by hiring and training organizational coaches who have an ongoing relationship with the district or state team and who spend a specified number of days working with that team back in their home setting." said Robert Schwartz<sup>sup>vi</sup>, academic dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "This is a much more robust year-round effort than the typical summer executive education program."

A core goal of both programs is to help forge new and lasting ties among state- and district-level leaders so that their policies and practices are more closely aligned to the goal of improved student achievement. In the often-balkanized world of public education, such alignment can be elusive and may even go against the grain.

“What we’ve found in the six states we’ve worked with,” said John English, the former senior project director of the UVA program,<sup>vii</sup> “is that there’s a huge disconnect between how state departments operate, how districts operate, and how districts connect to schools. State departments have set themselves up as almost compliance agencies, and it’s hard to get them into the mode of a being a support agency. So getting this aligned leadership is almost foreign.”

Lee Teitel, founding director and senior associate of Harvard’s program, makes a similar point: “If you ask district leaders how excited they are about working with the state, most will answer candidly, ‘we’re not so sure. They haven’t been a whole lot of help in the past, we’re not sure they have the capacity.’”

### **At Harvard, Helping Leaders Develop Learning Organizations**

A key objective of Harvard’s executive leadership program for educators is to provide these leaders with insights about whether or not the education systems they manage are functioning as “learning organizations.” It does so by focusing its curriculum on four basic strands:

- **Teaching and Learning:** Teams develop, articulate, and/or improve their current “point of view” about what good teaching and learning should look like in their district or across their state, keeping a strong focus on the instructional core—the relationship of students, teachers, in the presence of content—and use that point of view to drive decision-making inside and outside the classroom.
- **Systems Development and Organizational Coherence:** Teams increase their capacity to manage human and other resources, systems, culture, structures, and engagement with various stakeholders in a coherent and integrated way, driven by a widely-understood and shared improvement strategy.
- **Leadership and Team Development:** Individuals and teams identify and improve the leadership and teamwork skills needed throughout their organizations to successfully manage the deep changes this work entails and to establish collaborative norms that focus all adult interactions on the work of instructional improvement.
- **State/Local Networks:** Teams engage in a state/local educational improvement network to share instructional improvement practices, improve strategic alignment between the state agency and the districts, and sustain and spread the work.<sup>viii</sup>

### **University of Virginia: Giving Educators New Tools**

At the heart of the University of Virginia’s approach is the “balanced scorecard,” a management tool in use for years in the business world, that has been adopted for educational purposes by UVA’s Partnership for Leaders in Education Program and the Center for Educational Leadership and Technology (CELT). The scorecard is designed to help leaders and their teams lay out clear goals, progress measures and timetables, and

responsibility for meeting the goals. It is “balanced” across four perspectives intended to guide the development and tracking of appropriate strategies:

- **Financial perspective:** What resources are needed and how should they be managed?
- **Customers and stakeholders:** How do we look to our customers and stakeholders?
- **Internal business processes:** How cost-effective are our practices and procedures?
- **Employees and organizational capacity:** Are we able to sustain innovation, change and improvement?

Walter Gibson, superintendent of the 9,000-student Los Lunas, N.M., school district, said that when he and his leadership team entered the UVA program, the district had so many goals it was impossible to track them or create a coherent district-wide plan. “We had 57 goals,” he said. “I called it the ‘Heinz-57 list.’ When you have that many goals, you might as well have none, because you don’t know what’s important. A lot of districts face this kind of thing.” Using the balanced scorecard, the district has reduced and sharpened its goals to just three, each centered on student learning with clear measures of progress.

Developing a scorecard, however, is just the first step. UVA urges state and district leaders to establish a Project Management Oversight Committee (PMOC) to focus organizations on the goals, set priorities, provide needed resources, remove obstacles to success and evaluate results. To determine how well such a committee is functioning, these questions should be considered:

- Are the leading indicators reviewed regularly by the PMOC?
- Is the scorecard updated at least semi-annually and publicized?
- What percentage of the strategies in the scorecard are fully implemented?
- Of those not implemented, how many are being implemented by PMOC projects?
- What does the data say about the effectiveness of the strategies?
- What behaviors do you see changing in the organization as a result of the indicators?<sup>ix</sup>

### **Ending Business as Usual**

While it’s too soon to tell what the lasting benefits of the Harvard or UVA leadership programs will be either for the leaders themselves or the children they affect, early feedback suggests that many participants think the programs have been helpful in guiding their states or districts to much greater focus on learning, refinement of goals, and clearer ways to measure continuing progress.

Ultimately, the hope is that the tools, techniques and new mindsets being imparted by these pro-grams will become part of the permanent fabric of state and district leadership practice, surviving leadership transitions and sharpening the focus of public education leaders at all levels on chil-dren’s learning. “What happens very often in education is

that there are leadership changes,” said English. “If the tools and systems we put in place can survive the leadership change, then we know that we have some sustained change.”

*This article was adapted from a longer version that can be downloaded for free on The Wallace Foundation’s website. For the [full report](#) and other publications produced or commissioned by Wallace, visit the Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).*

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<sup>i</sup>“The Potential for Executive Leadership Training for Decision-Makers in Public K-12 Education,” a report prepared for The Wallace Foundation by Market Street Research, Inc., Northampton, MA., December 2004

<sup>ii</sup>Lee Teitel, *Supporting School System Leaders: The State of Effective Training Programs for School Superintendents*, 2006, a report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, p. 3. The report can be downloaded for free at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

<sup>iii</sup>In 2005, Wallace selected Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education, Kennedy School of Government, and Graduate School of Business, and the University of Virginia’s Partnership for Education (a collaboration between the Curry School of Education and the Darden School of Business Administration) to receive five-year grants totaling \$5 million each to implement executive leadership programs beginning in 2006. Over that five-year period, each program will provide training for three cohorts of state and district teams from selected Wallace-funded sites beginning in 2006 and ending in 2010. At the conclusion of the grant the UVA program will have served approximately 300 participants from six states, and the Harvard program will have served approximately 210 participants from six states.

<sup>iv</sup>The curriculum, approach and case studies in Harvard’s new program draws heavily from the Public Education Leadership Program (PELP), founded in 2000 as a collaboration between the Graduate School of Education and the Business School. It also draws on the leadership expertise of Harvard’s education, business and public policy faculty, the latter from the Kennedy School of Government. In addition, professors from HGSE’s Change Leadership Group and the Kennedy School leadership and public management programs have been important contributors to developing new and integrated curriculum for the program.

At UVA, the curriculum and approach of the new Executive Leadership Program for Educators are rooted in Partners for Leaders in Education (PLE), a collaboration begun in 2001 between the university’s Darden Graduate School of Business Administration and the Curry School of Education. The Darden School had been providing business leadership training for at least 30 years. The new education leadership program draws on that work and also owes considerably to the university’s involvement in the state of Virginia’s “school turnaround program,” begun some five years ago under then-Governor Mark Warner, to lift the performance of the state’s most troubled districts and schools.

<sup>v</sup>Harvard has worked with teams from Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oregon and New York. UVA has worked with teams from Delaware, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, New Mexico and Virginia.

<sup>vi</sup>Schwartz was president of Achieve, Inc. from 1997-2002, an independent nonprofit organization created by gov-ernors and corporations to help states improve their schools.

<sup>vii</sup>John English, who was interviewed extensively for this article, died November 15, 2008.

<sup>viii</sup>For more information, visit the [Harvard ExEl website](#).

<sup>ix</sup>Source: University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education Program and the Center for Educational Leadership and Technology. For more information, visit the program's [website](#).

## **Interim School Superintendents: Myth, Realities, Outlook**



**BY DR. LEONARD D. FITTS**

*Fitts is interim superintendent of the Glassboro (N.J.) School District. He formerly served two years as interim superintendent of Camden City (N.J.) Schools.*

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The mythology surrounding the interim superintendent goes something like this: Although interim school superintendents sit in the superintendent's chair, they usually don't act or behave like school superintendents. Often lacking the prestige, power and time to accomplish much, they quietly mind the store for a year or so until a new superintendent arrives. They act as "caretakers" to maintain business as usual.

In reality, the primary purpose of an interim school superintendent is to help the district maintain a smooth transition to a new permanent school superintendent. The interim school superintendent often acts as a breakwater between any turbulence that might have been the consequence of the previous administration difficulties and the future permanent administration. Therefore, the interim school superintendent often is able to implement changes more easily than someone currently employed in the district.

Interim school superintendents are a rare breed. They can deliver real results in a wide variety of scenarios because of their wealth of experience. For example, interim school superintendents in New Jersey have been assigned such tasks as: review, assess and

refocus the school district; restructure the senior management team; streamline and stabilize the purchasing process; mentor central office staff and enhance skills with implementation of an effective evaluation process to build morale and establish collaborative relationships; familiarize staff with promising and best practices to reduce the dropout rate; and reorganize and strengthen extraordinary accountability measures throughout the district.

At the end of the contract period, having accomplished as much as possible, interims prepare for a quick and controlled transition. They provide the data and information the arriving superintendent and quietly remove the “Interim” desk plate.

Here are some of the frequently asked questions about interim school superintendents.

**Is the title “interim” appropriate?** The title is very appropriate. Districts are dynamic, evolving and changing; it is necessary to keep these institutions moving forward. The role of the interim is to keep the district moving while a new superintendent is being sought.

**Can an interim school superintendent make aggressive decisions?** Yes. The board of education has granted that authority, so an interim school superintendent can function in that capacity.

**Can the interim be helpful in selecting the successor?** This depends on how the board of education would like to involve the interim and how the interim would like to be involved.

**Should the interim have specific goals?** Yes. The goals should be simple, clear and attainable. However, it is inappropriate to impose a new mission and vision for the school district.

What lessons are learned from being an interim school superintendent? Interims quickly learn that the district is full of fine teachers, staff, parents, students, citizens and others who are deeply concerned about high quality education.

## **Outlook for the Future**

The need for school districts to employ interims has been driven by a variety of factors, including a shortage of superintendents resulting in a more competitive market, an increasingly demanding job, and a decrease in current superintendents’ time in one position—less than three years in New Jersey. Last year, 40 school districts in New Jersey employed interim superintendents.

The nature of our schools has changed dramatically in the last decade and school districts can no longer move ahead as “business as usual.” They need mature, experienced practitioners with specific hands-on experience and a successful track record to address the issues confronting school districts.

# Mentoring New Leaders: Staying for the Long Haul



**BY DR. JOSEPHINE N. MOFFETT**

*Moffett is assistant professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the State University of New York, New Paltz.*

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Can you imagine having to replace five high school principals in one school and six directors of special education all within five years? That's not an unusual problem in an affluent county in New York State where there is a great deal of competition for positions and few quality applicants.

Many of my colleagues join wealthier districts that offer higher salaries, work with stable school boards and lead schools with active and supportive communities that consistently produce motivated students. Yet, few districts have all these stellar characteristics. Even districts that have wonderful reputations and advertise six figure salaries have a limited pool of strong applicants.

The responsibilities of school administrators are increasingly demanding. So what can you do to encourage experienced and committed educators to come to your district and stay for the long haul? I was superintendent in three districts, and all three had difficulty recruiting and retaining school administrators. One district had what many would consider a very challenging student body; many students had emotional and learning difficulties. The other districts faced challenges such as low student achievement, a high non English-speaking population, trouble passing budgets and what many saw as dysfunctional boards of education and fractured communities.

## ***So what did I learn?***

Whether you hire from within or seek outside applicants, it is important to surround yourself with the best administrators. This becomes a challenge due to retirements, the high turnover of administrators, the perception that school administration is not an attractive profession in terms of money or quality of life, and the decrease in the number of people entering the field of administration.

After reviewing the applicant pool for a school principalship yet one more time, I realized how difficult it is to find someone who has both raw talent and extensive experience. I made the difficult decision to recommend that the school board hire a promising assistant principal for the principal position. Some board members hesitated, but knew it was a difficult position to fill and so they supported my decision. I worked with my central

office cabinet and the head of the administrator's union to provide the support this new administrator needed.

Our plan included the help of a neighboring school principal who agreed to mentor the new administrator. Yet, it was evident fairly quickly that the new principal was overwhelmed. He had issues with time management and was getting bogged down in details that were not as important as the larger issues. He needed to use the secretary more efficiently, understand time management, and learn to prioritize and delegate. In addition, the new principal's "open door" policy was very disruptive and quickly threw him off track.

Together we crafted a professional development plan that included attending conferences and workshops that would address such issues as using technology for efficient administration and resolving conflicts. At that time, the state was focused on data mining and data analysis and conferences were readily available. Because conflict resolution skills are more difficult to teach in a conference setting, the local pupil personnel organization created a workshop for all administrators that included role playing difficult situations.

We realized that spending a few dollars now could ward off possible future expenses such as additional searches, legal representation, and loss of reputation in the community if another principal failed or left. We saw mentoring and coaching as a way to provide needed support in a way that would maintain the integrity of the new principal.

With input from the cabinet and union, I developed a plan of action that included mentoring and coaching. We defined mentoring as the passing of knowledge or information by someone with more experience. In most cases this person would be older and possibly retired. Coaches would provide insight, encourage introspection and offer feedback. A coach could be someone with the same job title in the same or another district. I then discussed the plan with the board. One board member argued that based on their high administrative salaries, administrators should know what to do and that help could be quickly provided by central office staff rather than an outside mentor or coach. The other members of the board joined in the reservation and did not approve the expenditure of funds to support the professional development of this administrator.

The following is a synopsis of the information I gave to the board to support my case for a mentoring program.

### **The Importance of Support**

Most people recognize mentoring as a relationship of support and trust. Zachary (2000) characterizes mentoring as a mutual learning partnership. It is important to formalize the tradition of mentoring and therefore give it value within the community. Coaching and mentoring should be viewed as a form of professional development for administrators in the same way it is considered professional development for teachers. Given the monetary cost of replacing administrators—including advertising and interviewing—and the

intangible cost associated with district reputation and staff morale, mentoring can actually be very cost effective.

A district's decision not to provide administrative support to new administrators is truly pennywise and pound foolish. The clamor from a few discontents in the community about spending money on administration will pale in comparison to the flack you will receive for having a rotating administrative staff largely supported by interims.

At least 32 states currently have legislative policies that support mentoring programs for new administrators (Alsbury & Hackman, 2006). Some states actually mandate mentoring for new administrators. Longstanding programs in Massachusetts, Texas and New Jersey provide a formal forum that allows new administrators to learn from mistakes and have one on one mentoring with an experienced professional (Been, Kate 2007). These programs generally run from 12 months to 18 months and often include monthly opportunities to meet. California, Iowa and Alaska have voluntary programs, although it is not unusual to have the executive coaching practice negotiated into the contracts of administrators. The ability to question a seasoned veteran is priceless and helps provide focus and create a smoother transition.

Despite this background and policy context, our board of education was not persuaded and voted against this developmental support.

### ***What would I have done differently?***

One of the responsibilities of a superintendent is to help the board of education grow and learn, and it's a responsibility that superintendents must take seriously. Although the outcome was not the one I wanted, it was my job to continue to educate the board. Instead, the human side of me took over, I became disenchanted, lost a teachable moment and gave up on this issue.

I am now in the position of viewing this problem from the other side. As a professor of educational administration I teach and support educators who want to become administrators. I clearly can see that even the very best (and there are truly some excellent candidates) will need advice, coaching and mentoring once they get on the job. I try in my classes to give them less theory and more practice in the form of real life role playing and "war stories," however, there is nothing like the real day-to-day experiences of being an administrator on the job.

### ***What can districts do?***

So what can districts do to make certain that these new administrators become successful and have a long history in your district? Take a page from the internship program of educational administration programs. A district should formally accept a mentoring program for administrators. The program should include the following 10 components. These 10 components are the basic areas that new administrators need for continued support.

1. **Time Management**  
Discuss how to handle multiple functions, especially when different constituents want your time. This is an important issue and time should be given to review, discuss, log and reflect. Effective strategic planning and time management strategies can have a direct impact on program development in schools (Bolman & Burke, 2003).
2. **Leadership and Student Performance**  
Discuss and review how the novice leader can mobilize the internal and external community to support student achievement. There is a statistically significant correlation between school level leadership and student achievement, and the McREL research provides useful definitions of effective school leadership to frame a personal assessment of practice (Waters & Cameron, 2005).
3. **Communication**  
Review and discuss administrative presentations to staff, the board and the community. Allow an opportunity to reflect on organization and content and need for changes. Skills necessary for becoming an effective protégé include goal setting, communication, the capacity to seek and act on feedback, and reflection (Searby & Tripses, 2007).
4. **Personal Reflection**  
Reflect with the use of logs how the administrator has supported teacher growth and how this support has led to improved student achievement improvement. Zull (2002) emphasizes the importance of reflection in the learning process, stating that "while experience is necessary for learning, reflection is required because reflection is searching for connections."
5. **Professional Development**  
The dramatic new ways of understanding student learning, instruction and assessment, and school management and professional community call for equally dramatic changes in the competencies of school principals. The work of education is hard; the job of the principal is no exception. Acquiring and mastering the requisite skills of school management and leadership, especially in the context of contemporary pressures and expectations on schools, is a supremely challenging task. The challenge for school authorities is to make the task doable, in part through rigorous and worthwhile programs of professional development (Hunter, 1997).
6. **Conflict Resolution Strategies**  
Discuss situations that may result in conflict and then role play interventions. Data suggest that in the present decision making climate, principals adapt to contexts in which conflicts occur by adopting either transactional or transformational leadership behaviors. Issues related to personnel and materials distribution most often result in the educators reacting as transactional leaders (Schultz, 1999).
7. **Politics**  
Discuss and reflect on the politics of education as they relate to BOEs, PTAs, unions, etc. Every school leader has politics to deal with, so they must develop some political savvy to be successful (Searby and Williams, 2007).

## 8. **Public Relations**

Review the district's public relations plan and the role of the administrator. Rather than asking "Can my school afford a good PR program?" ask "Can my school afford to not have a good PR program?" Negativism must be countered with effective PR.

## 9. **Technology**

Discuss the role of technology in education, especially as it relates to scheduling, communications, data analysis and its impact on outcomes. At a time when information and communication technologies are being integrated into the classroom as learning tools, and when teachers are being asked to incorporate technology into their teaching practices, principals should take an active approach to innovation and foster an environment in which such innovation has greater benefits for their staff and students (Schiller, 2003).

## 10. **Budget Development**

Discuss and plan budgets, including the influence of the community, faculty, staff, and PTA. Critique and reflect on budget presentation.

So what is the benefit for districts that have supportive programs for administrators? According to McREL research (Waters, 2003), leadership directly affects student achievement. So it stands to reason that having skilled, dedicated leaders will have a positive impact on student achievement. In addition, having a formal supportive program for administrators may make the difference for an administrator who is deciding between your district and another district.

From the organization's perspective mentoring can increase motivation and productivity and decrease turnover. A structured mentoring and coaching program also gives a message about a board that supports education for all of its constituents. After all, a district that is a true learning community will want to support continued lifelong learning for everyone. This is a powerful message to your staff, families, community and especially to students. If you think that your students are not aware of the actions of the board do not fool yourself. I remember clearly hearing students lament how the board or community behaved at public meetings.

Mentoring programs can be a win-win situation for your district and the novice administrator.

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## **New Report from Wallace: Assessing the Effectiveness of School Leaders**

Research concludes that most assessments of school leaders in use today are not as focused on learning as they should be, nor are they effective in gathering reliable facts about how leaders' behaviors are or are not promoting learning. This new report from The Wallace Foundation describes the elements of a possible new direction in leader assessment – what should be assessed, and how. It highlights newly-developed assessment instruments that seek to apply those elements. And, it discusses the potential, the challenges and the unknowns of using assessment as a key means of promoting not only better leader performance but also systemwide improvements that benefit children. [Learn more.](#)

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[Robert S. McCord](#), Editor

The American Association of School Administrators is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders across the United States.