Ohio’s Initiatives to Position Leadership at the Core of Instructional Improvement

For the past decade, The Wallace Foundation has worked with 22 states and numerous districts to strengthen school leadership. As one of the states in Wallace’s education leadership initiative, Ohio’s initial efforts in 2004 centered around fostering relationships between the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) and eight urban districts. These relationships established the foundation for developing coordinated leadership programs throughout the state. It gradually became clear, however, that a focus on partnerships was not comprehensive enough to produce the robust changes officials were hoping for. Strong leadership holds potential for classroom-level improvements, but to make this happen the state, districts, and schools in Ohio needed to strengthen and coordinate their system of policies and practices around leadership.

Drawing on research and lessons learned across the state network supported by The Wallace Foundation, Ohio used a framework called the Cohesive Leadership System (CLS). The CLS structure enabled each level of the system to address the shift of the principal’s role from building manager to “instructional leader” who is more directly responsible for facilitating improvements in teaching and learning. The CLS set up shared goals for three interrelated areas affecting the success of leaders: the standards that define quality leadership and provide a basis for holding leaders accountable; the training that prepares leaders for their role as catalysts of learning; and the range of conditions and incentives that help or hinder those leaders. This Brief describes several ways Ohio has operationalized key elements of the CLS, either by developing new initiatives or by aligning existing processes, tools, and people.

Defining Effective Leadership
While the state was already committed to collaboration, organizing around the CLS made these relationships more effective. Key stakeholders came together to craft standards for teachers and principals, and recently Ohio became one of only two states in the nation with standards for superintendents. However, participants agreed that the state still needed to create a common language and shared understanding of what constitutes the “right work” of improving teaching and learning to ensure coherence across the system. So in 2007 the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC), a partnership between the ODE and the Buckeye Association of School Administrators, set out to clarify the knowledge, skills, and performance criteria that reflect effective instructional leadership.

OLAC created a framework that outlines six coherent processes: 1) data and decision-making, 2) focused goal setting, 3) instruction and the learning process, 4) community engagement, 5) resource management, and 6) board development and governance. The framework gets closer to implementation because it defines the “must haves” for effective leadership for each aspect of the initiative.

OLAC also used the principles underlying the framework to guide development of its online self-assessments for individual leaders and leadership teams, who can then access OLAC’s online professional development modules. Now, as Ohio continues to progress, the buy-in from each level of the system positions the OLAC framework as an anchor to the state’s general improvement process, both enabling and encouraging central themes to cut across all programs and policy initiatives.

Principal Evaluation System
One way Ohio is continuing to cement the connections between state-level regulatory policies and effective classroom-level leadership is by developing a performance-based system for evaluating principals. To foster a holistic, growth-oriented view of evaluation, the state’s CLS now includes a three-part Ohio Principal Evaluation System (OPES) that includes 1) standards-based goal setting, 2) a 360-degree survey with feedback from educators, and 3) measures of organizational effectiveness (e.g., student achievement, customer satisfaction).

During this school year, Ohio is expanding its OPES pilots to 19 districts and 140 schools and implementing train-the-trainer programs. State officials believe each district’s context will affect how the evaluation system is used and adapted. Some districts will use all three components, officials believe,
while others will only apply the goal-setting process (which sets up ongoing feedback and targeted development, not a single meeting) to all principals and may do so with modifications. OPES’s use of multiple data sources and attention to a cycle of support moves evaluation beyond just compliance—instilling a culture of accountability for school improvement and student learning.

Recent legislation also puts pressure on preparation programs for the development of a high-quality educator workforce. Ohio’s higher education chancellor and state superintendent of public instruction are examining how to incorporate, as one of multiple criteria, a measure of students’ one-year academic improvement into teacher and principal evaluation instruments. The value-added metric will be a key element in preparation program performance reports.

Shared Authority and Teacher Leadership
One lesson from Wallace’s leadership initiative is that even the best leaders cannot perform alone. Distributing leadership by using school and district leadership teams is one supportive operating condition that Ohio has committed to as part of its cohesive leadership work. For example, legislation passed this summer charges Ohio’s State Board of Education with developing guidelines for districts to reinforce “thinking and learning” organizational cultures. By formally adopting language around implementation of professional learning communities, the state is making an effort to intentionally link state policy with school-level collaborative structures that have led to improvements in student achievement.

Similarly coordinating efforts from the top and bottom layers of the system, Gov. Ted Strickland recently set a 2011 deadline to restructure the state’s teacher licensure system. The new infrastructure supports shared authority and requires a teacher leader in every school. This political priority coincided with grassroots efforts to reconfigure the teacher career ladder. In 2008, ODE began working with Kansas, Delaware, Alabama, and Kentucky, and Joseph Murphy of Vanderbilt University as part of the Five-State Teacher Leadership Consortium Project to develop a course of study leading to a credential in teacher leadership. With four universities piloting the teacher leader endorsement, Ohio is solidifying the connections and improving the quality of leadership practice at the preservice and classroom levels.

Urban Principal Credential
Research makes it clear that there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without interventions by a strong leader. To help develop the state’s cadre of effective urban leaders, Ohio’s Wallace initiative team is working with the Southern Regional Education Board to develop an urban principal training program and endorsement credential. The standards and indicators that delineate knowledge and define performance specific to urban leadership build coherently and synergistically off the larger leadership framework. The principal training program targets recruitment strategies to identify promising candidates and will create intensive immersion experiences, resulting in program completers becoming eligible for an Ohio principal’s license with an urban leadership endorsement. The State Board of Education adopted these program standards in October 2009.

Ongoing Challenges
Even with Ohio’s strong foundation and shared philosophy for instructional leadership, challenges remain to scaling reforming elements statewide and maintaining coordination within the system. This summer, the state’s entry-year principal mentoring program—one of the original redesign efforts to better link leadership training and practice—was cut due to budget tightening. Additionally, the state faces some uncertainty around preparation programs because of a recent transfer of program approval authority from the ODE to the State Board of Regents. Lastly, while Ohio has made impressive progress in laying the CLS groundwork, as with many reform efforts, it will be some years before it is clear which investments have been the most worthwhile. The implementation phase for much of the work is just getting underway and it will take time to gather results and draw lessons for future efforts. As it continues to move forward, the state must balance a commitment to sustaining the initiative with a lack of data.

For More Information
For additional information about Ohio’s leadership initiatives and the design and implementation of the state’s cohesive leadership system, please contact Cynthia Yoder, Executive Director, Center for the Teaching Profession, Ohio Department of Education at Cynthia.Yoder@ode.state.ohio.us.

For resources and information on education leadership, please visit The Wallace Foundation’s Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

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