

Superintendents' Resource Guide

In the research on school improvement, there has been somewhat consistent understanding for over 30 years about what characterizes highly effective schools (Redding, 2006). Effective school leaders operate out of a clear and shared focus in which they maintain high expectations for the academic success of all students (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). The principals and teachers in effective schools design instructional programs in which the curriculum and instruction methods are aligned with standards for learning (English & Steffy, 2001; Tyler, 1949), and assessment "for" and assessment "of" learning are both used to inform professional practice (Chappuis & Chappius, 2002). The decisions about instructional programs are research-based; implementation is monitored frequently; and, when students are struggling to meet predefined goals, adjustments are made based on a set theory of action (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Collaboration and communication is seen as a critical component of overcoming obstacles within a framework for continuous improvement (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). These and other characteristics have been demonstrated in the research literature consistently.

What then makes for a highly effective district? School district superintendents have not traditionally been the primary instructional leader in the organizations they lead. They have focused on such things as financial and personnel issues, management of educational specialists and programs, and dealing with conflict and crisis (Fullan, 2007). Blumberg (as noted in Fullan, 2007) found that matters of curriculum and instruction rarely even entered into the "working lives" of superintendents. This is not surprising considering the difficulty of the job that they have, but it is disconcerting in light of the types of characteristics that are necessary to help schools succeed. Therefore, according to Fullan (2007), effective districts demonstrate deviance from this norm and have what he terms a "positive district ethos" (p. 213). This ethos is demonstrated in the following ways:

- Taking care of business (a learning focus)
- Monitoring performance (an accountability focus)
- Changing policies/practices (a change focus)
- Consideration and caring for stakeholders (a caring focus)
- Creating shared values (a commitment focus)
- Creating community support (a community focus)

In terms of leadership, effective districts are led by influential superintendents, who exhibit three types of leadership: "educational leadership (focus on pedagogy and learning), political leadership (securing resources, building coalitions), and managerial leadership (using structures for participation, supervision, support, and planning)" (Fullan, 2007, p. 210). They are not only leaders in these three domains, they are also teachers. Effective superintendents model, coach, and build leadership capacity within principals, teachers, board members, and others; and they

are also very skilled at cultivating relationships while driving people to improve (Fullan, 2007). Additionally, in order to truly attain improvement at scale in multiple schools, they must be adept at "balancing top-down and bottom-up forces" (Fullan, 2007) in a framework for decision-making that is both shared and hierarchical (Redding, 2006). They accomplish change by engaging school leaders purposefully and meaningfully, by being collaborative rather than prescriptive, and by leaving the more minute details of plans for improvement in the hands of the principal and staff of each school (Fullan, 2007).

References

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