

## STORIES FROM THE FIELD

FEBRUARY 2009

**LEADING FOR CHANGE:**

## New Training Opportunities for Education's Executives

*Professional development opportunities are common for teachers and principals who operate on the front lines of education. But they are much rarer for public education's top leaders – state chiefs, superintendents, board members and others – who are further from classrooms but whose policies and practices nonetheless can profoundly affect student achievement. 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 describes these programs and some of the early experiences of leadership teams that have attended them.*

The case under discussion on a recent summer morning at Harvard by about 80 Massachusetts and Oregon state and district leaders was a near-fatal overdose of morphine administered to a ten-year-old at a Minneapolis children's hospital.<sup>i</sup> This true-life case about an accident and its subsequent handling by a hospital's leaders wasn't about schools. But education professor Monica Higgins challenged the gathering to consider the leadership issues the case raised for education executives:

What, she asked the group, does a leader risk or gain by apologizing to parents and admitting mistakes when something goes wrong? How should leaders distinguish between institutional responsibility for mishaps, on the one hand, and individual staff "screw-ups" related to incompetence or a refusal to learn? How can a leader create an institutional culture that puts the welfare of children ahead of all other considerations? How can leaders foster a culture within their organizations that moves from finger-pointing to "blameless reporting" when things go wrong?<sup>ii</sup>

Some 550 miles away, at a similar summer institute for education leaders at the University of Virginia, about 50 state and district-level leaders from New Mexico were also delving into a case about effective leadership – this one examining current efforts by the state of Delaware to have "world-class" schools by 2015 that prepare every child for college and the workplace. A key element of that ambitious plan is to ensure that what's being taught in every classroom in Delaware's 19 districts is the same as what's being expected, and tested, statewide – what educators like to call "alignment." To achieve that all-important alignment, Delaware's state and district leaders have begun to use business-style management tools and techniques which are helping them to establish, and manage, well-coordinated goals and strategy objectives, progress measures, short- and long-term targets, and who is responsible. The emerging result in Delaware is an exceptional

Stories from the Field is an occasional series that offers on-the-scene reports on the progress and the challenges of the work that The Wallace Foundation is supporting in its three current focus areas:

- strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement;
- enhancing out-of-school time learning opportunities;
- building appreciation & demand for the arts.

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level of state-to-district-to-school coordination. If sustained, the hoped-for result will be widespread, equitably distributed improvements in teaching and learning.

State and district leaders – superintendents and their teams, board members and agency heads – are several steps removed from classrooms. But as the above cases suggest, 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 can be largely negated if teachers don't teach what standards and curricula prescribe and high-stakes tests measure. Yet there are few opportunities 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

more 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.

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## How can a leader create an institutional culture that puts the welfare of kids ahead of all other considerations?

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Market research<sup>iii</sup> indicates that many education leaders would welcome mid-career development programs that would provide such opportunities. But the research also reveals concern about the likely price-tag and time com-

mitment such programs might carry, some skepticism about their practical value and relevance, and questions about the feasibility of training for teams of leaders. As Valerie A. Woodruff, recently-retired superintendent of Delaware<sup>iv</sup> put it, “I’m very jealous of my time and I’m not going to go anywhere for a week and waste my time.”

### BEYOND “ONE-SHOTS”

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>v</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>vi</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>vii</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>viii</sup>

“What makes our program very different from the traditional professional development program in our sector,” said Robert Schwartz,<sup>ix</sup> academic dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, “is that 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. And we as faculty go out twice a year in each state to do a customized two-day institute to follow up on key concepts introduced in the summer. So this is a much more robust year-round effort than the typical summer executive education program.”

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. Besides the aforementioned children's hospital case, a sampling of Harvard's curriculum includes education-based leadership case studies concerning the Boston, Chicago, Long Beach and San Francisco school districts, and business-oriented cases from Taco Bell, Inc. and Southwest Airlines. At UVA, the cases also feature a mix of business and education examples, including an examination of the Richmond, VA, public schools, where district leaders have been overseeing a strong recent turnaround in student achievement with the help of management tools and techniques imparted by UVA.

A key element of the Harvard ExEL Summer Institutes has also been the presence of "voices from the field"—representatives from states or districts that are engaged and have achieved some measure of success in developing and implementing a coherent strategy for system-wide improvement. In the summer 2008 Harvard program, for example, presenters from Atlanta, GA, Montgomery County, MD, and several Kentucky state and district officials shared their successes and challenges with participants from Oregon and Massachusetts.

A goal of both programs is to provide education executives with a safe place to be candid with themselves and peers about where they need help as leaders. "We call it 'facing the brutal facts,'" said John English, the former senior project director of the UVA program.<sup>x</sup> "If we don't do that, we won't get to square one. It has to be safe to say that you need to improve, and not have to say you're a horrible failure."

Similarly, Harvard's Robert Kegan, who co-chairs the Graduate School of Education's Change Leadership Group that is a key contributor of curriculum and faculty to the executive leadership program, has pushed leaders and teams to be more self-aware of their role in the improvement process. Specifically, Kegan, a developmental psychologist, has written and spoken extensively about the "immunity to change," behaviors and attitudes exhibited by leaders that work against change even if they are passionately committed to it. An example might be setting lower learning expectations for certain children not out of disrespect for them, but out of what seems like "love" or not wanting to burden them further.<sup>xi</sup>

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The leader training experiences don'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 Woodruff 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."

Both Harvard and UVA stress the importance of having participants develop specific learning-related goals with measurable outcomes, along with concrete plans to take immediate action on those goals. Participants at UVA's summer institute, for example, are asked to draft and commit to "90-Day Next Steps" action plans that lay out specific goals, with the added knowledge that a

UVA visiting team will come to their states and conduct a constructive but no-holds-barred mid-year progress review of their work.

#### BRIDGING THE STATE-DISTRICT GAP

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. It is not uncommon to hear district leaders speak of states as enforcers rather than helpers, and some even question whether state officials have much expertise to offer districts in education matters.

“What we’ve found in the six states we’ve worked with,” said English, “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.’”

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Nonetheless, Harvard officials cite Kentucky as a particularly promising early success story in developing such state-district connections. The Kentucky network that attended the Harvard program is now meeting regularly throughout the year, facilitated by a Harvard coach, to address mutual issues of organizational coherence, leader-

ship transitions, peer learning, and how to expand this nascent network to include other districts as well as other parts of the state education agency.

“One of the measures that we tend to use in this project is, at what point do they stop talking about the work they’re doing as ‘Harvard work,’ and internalizing it as their own work,” said Schwartz. “In some ways, just the mere fact that we are bringing states and districts together has had some of the greatest impact. That’s not to say that some of those relationships aren’t still tense or fragile. But getting them into the same project in the same room and getting them to think about their interdependence has turned out to be both challenging but potentially powerful.”

#### SHARPENING GOALS, DRIVING ACCOUNTABILITY

Both Harvard and UVA challenge executive leaders to continually assess how their actions are affecting classrooms and to use data to determine their progress in improving learning. To that end, Harvard’s program emphasizes a framework that includes key aspects of the instructional core, organizational coherence, leadership and teamwork, and state and local networks (see text box, page 5). Program participants are then coached beyond the summer sessions to examine and overcome either personal or group resistance to change and to help them establish and maintain a system-wide focus on learning.

The UVA program, by contrast, centers on specific tools and processes, most notably the “balanced scorecard” (see text box, page 6), to sharpen and align goals, fix responsibility and continually track progress at all levels of public education. Before Superintendent Walter

Gibson and his leadership team from Los Lunas, NM entered the UVA program, it had so many goals it was impossible to track them or create a coherent district-wide plan. “We had 57 goals,” he recalled. “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 9,000 student district south of Albuquerque has reduced and sharpened its goals to three, each centered on student learning with clear measures of progress.

But creating such a scorecard is only a first step. Understanding how to follow through on plans and put in place the necessary mechanisms to ensure continued progress is often the harder part. To accomplish that, UVA encourages states and districts to establish “Project Management Oversight Committees” that include people with the authority to monitor progress and hold accountable those responsible for achieving goals. “Too many people are focused on the scorecard, and not enough on what it takes to put processes in place to get to the outcome you want,” said Woodruff. “I read and see people posting scorecards, but there’s nothing beneath them. Yes, you need to report on outcomes. But it’s the processes you put in place to get to the outcome, hold yourselves accountable, set goals, adjust activities and resources, and not lose sight of what actual work needs to be done.”

Both Harvard and UVA call upon participating teams to identify instructional improvement goals that they see as central to their work and then track their progress toward measurable outcomes. UVA’s program calls upon state and district participants to create “benchmarks of success” within three broad domains of activity related to improved student learning: governance and leadership alignment, strategic plan management alignment, and curriculum and instructional alignment. Within each of those areas, this benchmarking requires leaders to clearly state their action goals, and for each goal, candidly assess and describe their current status as well as plans for sustainability. These self-assessments, on a 1-5 scale<sup>xii</sup>, state whether a given goal is already in place, in progress, or is showing minimal or no progress.

In 2008, for example, the Christina, Delaware district team listed 30 benchmarking goals – ten each in the three domains of governance and leadership, strategic plan management, and curriculum and instruction. The self-assessments were relatively high in governance and leadership, as evidenced, for example, by the successful passage of a key capital spending referendum by clearly articulated mission, vision and goal statements, and by the adoption of balanced scorecard objectives and measures that have been posted on the district’s website. But the self-assess-

#### 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.

For more information, visit the Harvard ExEl website at [www.exel.harvard.edu](http://www.exel.harvard.edu)

ments were much lower in the curriculum and instruction area, where progress on a range of goals and student achievement measures was highly uneven from school to school.

This benchmarking, the balanced scorecard and the establishment of a project management oversight committee to monitor progress are transforming the way business is conducted in the Christina, DE school district, according to Lillian Lowery, the district's superintendent who was named in January 2009 to succeed the retiring Woodruff as Delaware's state chief. "These are our tools for reform," she said. "They've focused us in ways we never could have been."

## TOOLS FOR EDUCATION LEADERS: THE BALANCED SCORECARD AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT OVERSIGHT PROCESS

The balanced scorecard, a management tool in use for years in the business world, has been adopted for educational purposes by the University of Virginia'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?

Developing a scorecard 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:

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

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 at <http://www.darden.virginia.edu/html/area.aspx?styleid=3&area=ple>

"Before," Lowery continued, "people would go off to a conference and have a great idea and we'd say, great, do it. Now we say, before we spend a dime, it has to match to our strategic plan, and how does what you're bringing to the table help the core mission of students perform better, who's going to lead it, the timeline, the deliverables."

"Most educators do not think in these terms, quite frankly," said English. "They think in terms of, 'if I can just get more resources, then whatever I'm trying to achieve will improve.' You have to change that mindset. Schools operate on a shoestring. But at the same time they have to report to their governing boards and the public how they're using these resources. And that's what the balanced scorecard was finally able to bring to bear."

## ENDING BUSINESS AS USUAL

The key goal of both programs, then, is to prepare and support leaders to end business as usual in their states and districts and to work instead to make bold, well-aligned, system-wide policy changes that last and that benefit all children. An in-depth evaluation of the two programs is being conducted by Policy Studies Associates, Inc., with funding from The Wallace Foundation, to examine participants' perspectives on their experiences in these programs, and to assess the impact of that participation on individual professional behavior, organizational

policies and practices, and the extent to which states and districts are cooperating in ways that support better teaching and learning.

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.

Former Kentucky state education commissioner Gene Wilhoit<sup>xiii</sup> calls his summer at Harvard “the most intense and challenging professional development training of my career. Our teams worked from daylight until dark, often late into the night. We reviewed case studies of business that are doing extraordinary things to move their companies forward. We took time to reflect on our own practices. Do we just come to work and stay focused on our tasks for the day, without challenging ourselves to do more? Do we ask for help from others or do we work on our own?”

Ultimately, the hope is that the tools, techniques and new mindsets being imparted by these programs 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 children'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.”

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>i</sup> Amy Edmondson, Michael A. Roberto, Anita Tucker, “Children's Hospital and Clinics,” a Harvard Business School case study, 2001: President and Fellows of Harvard College.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 and 13

<sup>iii</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>iv</sup> Valerie Woodruff retired as state superintendent of Delaware in January 2009.

<sup>v</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>vi</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>vii</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 Leader-

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

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

<sup>xi</sup> Beverly Breton Carroll, "Overcoming the Immunity to Change: Robert Kegan," Harvard Graduate School of Education, a web article available at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/impact/stories/faculty/kegan.php>.

<sup>xii</sup> The self-assessment scale is as follows: 1=Not at all; 2=Minimal; 3=Somewhat; 4=In progress; 5=Already exists

<sup>xiii</sup> Wilhoit currently serves as executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

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## **WALLACE'S WORK IN EDUCATION LEADERSHIP**

*The mission of The Wallace Foundation is to enable institutions to expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people. We do this by supporting and sharing effective ideas and practices. Since 2000, the core goal of our education work has been to develop, test and share useful approaches for improving the training of education leaders and the conditions that support their ability to significantly lift student achievement across entire districts and states, especially in high needs schools. To achieve broad impact, we also commission relevant research and share useful practices and lessons within and among our grantee states and districts, and with other interested and affected audiences nationwide.*

*This journalistic account about the executive leadership training programs that the Foundation is supporting at Harvard University and the University of Virginia reflects the collective contributions and thinking of Wallace's education program, research and communications staff and was written by Lee Mitgang, Wallace's Director of Editorial Services.*

## **RELATED WALLACE PRODUCTS**

To learn more about education leadership training and related topics, the following can be downloaded for free from The Wallace Foundation's website at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org):

*Becoming a Leader: Preparing Principals for Today's Schools*, The Wallace Foundation, 2008

*Making State Accountability Count: How New Mexico Supports Principals with Data Tools*, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, 2007

*Schools Need Good Leaders Now: State Progress in Creating a Learning-Centered School Leadership System*, Southern Regional Education Board, 2007

*Supporting School System Leaders: The State of Effective Training Programs for School Superintendents*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2006