



SREB

The Three Essentials:

*Improving Schools Requires
District Vision, District and
State Support, and Principal
Leadership*

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LEARNING-CENTERED LEADERSHIP PROGRAM



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Introduction

American school districts' actions can either lead schools to greater success or stifle progress in student learning. Yet, despite their central role in education, school districts are among the least understood components of the nation's public education infrastructure.¹ Often, the school board and district staff are considered no more than middlemen in the education enterprise, passing federal and state funds on to schools — where the “real work” of education takes place — and keeping track of school compliance with federal and state laws, regulations and policies.

To shed greater light on the crucial role of districts in improving student achievement, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) conducted 35 interviews with superintendents, school board chairs and selected central-office leaders from seven school districts in SREB states.* **The purpose of these interviews was to investigate the role of the district office in providing principals with the working conditions they need in order to improve middle grades and high schools. The central question underlying all of the interviews was, “Can key district leaders effectively articulate the ways in which their district helps principals improve their schools?”** The results of this study add to a growing body of research — and to SREB's extensive work with middle grades and high schools — showing the difference districts can make in improving education.² Just as some teachers succeed while others fail and some schools succeed while others fail, some districts consistently excel while others continue to underperform. Findings from this study suggest a strong relationship between specific district practices and student achievement results.

This study of district staff members' perceptions of their support for principals complements a previous SREB study on principals' perceptions of school district support. (See SREB's *The District Leadership Challenge: Empowering Principals to Improve Teaching and Learning*.) Qualitative research methods were used in both studies to develop a rich understanding of principals' working conditions from interviews with key district staff and school board members. Highly supportive school districts are implementing many of the best practices encouraged by Wendy Togneri and Stephen Anderson in their groundbreaking 2003 study, *Beyond Islands of Excellence*. SREB has adapted Togneri and Anderson's recommendations as a framework for its investigation of district practices; those recommendations are consistent with SREB's experience in supporting comprehensive school reform in the 1,200 schools that are a part of the SREB *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* network and the 500 schools in the *Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW)* network. **The result of SREB's work is a set of seven strategies that supportive districts can use to help their middle grades and high school principals succeed in improving student achievement and the learning environment:**

Strategy 1: Establish a clear focus and a strategic framework of core beliefs, effective practices and goals for improving student achievement. Highly supportive districts provide principals with a focused mission and vision of key beliefs and practices to guide school improvement. This can be a short

* Due to the small sample size for this study, appropriate caution should be used in drawing wider conclusions from the results of the study.

mission statement, such as “Striving for excellence — no exceptions, no excuses.” Or, it can be a living framework collectively adopted and developed by the community over a period of time and continuously monitored and revised by an active school board.

Strategy 2: Organize and engage the school board and district office in support of each school.

In highly supportive districts, the school board continuously focuses on improving student achievement, and central office personnel spend the majority of their time in the schools, working with principals and teachers to create cultures of success uniquely suited to the students’ needs and the faculty’s strengths. Principals are given the authority to make hiring and firing decisions for their schools and are expected to be (and supported as) instructional leaders.

Strategy 3: Provide instructional coherence and support. Highly supportive district leaders understand the challenging work principals must do and, in many cases, have been successful principals themselves. These leaders support the principals’ focus on instruction and model that priority by publicly focusing on curriculum and instruction in school board and superintendent’s meetings. They routinely engage school and teacher-leaders in developing and using tools such as walkthroughs, pacing guides and proven, research-based instructional practices — rather than micromanaging staff.

Strategy 4: Invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals, teacher-leaders and district staff. Highly supportive districts give principals tools to be effective instructional leaders and continuous learners. The districts set aside time for collective learning and instruction-focused professional development and provide beginning principals with induction and mentoring to increase their chances of success as effective instructional leaders.

Strategy 5: Provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices, and assist schools to use data effectively. Highly supportive districts have adopted strategies to help principals disaggregate, analyze and interpret their student achievement data quickly to discern student deficits and identify weaknesses in school and classroom practices. They help schools use formative and benchmark assessments to ensure that the results of high-stakes tests do not come as a surprise to teachers or principals.

Strategy 6: Optimize the use of resources to improve student learning. Highly supportive districts provide principals with resources — human and financial — and the flexibility to use those resources to address unique school needs while remaining consistent with school and district improvement frameworks and strategic plans. Schools with greater needs receive greater resources and assistance in assessing which school and classroom practices are working and in eliminating ineffective practices. These schools also are supported with outside coaches and facilitators who are skilled in assisting the school and teacher-leaders to address how low-income and minority students are being taught and how instruction must change if achievement gaps are to be closed.

Strategy 7: Use open, credible processes to involve key school and community leaders in shaping a vision for improving schools. Highly supportive districts engage the whole community in setting a common vision for student learning. They seek principals’ and teacher-leaders’ ideas on major decisions about district policies, changes in curriculum and instructional improvements, use of professional

development resources and the district's budget. They encourage principals to use leadership teams to lead their schools and to engage the school community in setting a vision and creating a school improvement plan.

The seven strategies begin with the district setting a direction by articulating a vision for schools, specific goals consistent with that vision and a framework of best practices that principals can use to achieve that vision and meet key goals. The strategies give principals and their teachers the support, the capacity, the resources and the flexibility to meet their goals. A comprehensive strategic plan provides principals and their staff with direction and support so they can shape and implement a school improvement plan based on the unique context of their school and the academic, social and emotional needs of their students. Once the district has assisted each school leadership team in developing a school improvement plan — and has provided the resources, the high-quality professional development, and the technical assistance, coaching and feedback to the school principal and teachers — **the school leadership team should be held accountable for implementing the plan with fidelity and, eventually, for improved student performance.**

The seven strategies outlined in this report create a framework for districts to provide principals with the direction they need and to build their capacity and their staff's to lead their schools more effectively. **As long as school district boards and office staff operate without a sound and comprehensive strategic plan, the flavor-of-the-month approach will prevail, and low-performing schools will not have the continuity of direction and support they need to become functional and successful schools.** Supportive districts and their leaders know that without a thoughtful vision, effective principal leadership and teacher cooperation, little progress will be made to improve student outcomes.

Study Method

The purpose of this study is to illuminate how districts support principals to improve student learning. Participating districts were selected from three SREB states. District selection criteria were designed to yield a sample that was representative of the 16-state SREB region, based on district size, demographics and student achievement. To protect the identity of districts and respondents, each district is assigned a fictitious name in this report.

SREB staff worked with superintendents' offices to identify six leaders in each district for interviews. Desired respondents included:

- the superintendent.
- the school board chair or other board member.
- chief district officers for curriculum and instruction, professional development, assessment and accountability, and business operations.

Seven Strategies: How Districts Can Support Principals Effectively in School Improvement

Strategy 1: Establish a clear focus and a strategic framework of core beliefs, effective practices and goals for improving student achievement.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Promote school leaders' confidence in their ability to succeed and in their belief that improved school practices are important to their students' future.
- Share a common vision of high expectations for all groups of students and have a strategic planning framework that enables school leaders and faculty to customize a set of strategic goals and actions for their school.
- Hold district leaders and staff accountable for working collaboratively with principals, their school leadership teams and faculties to implement a strategic plan and to hold principals accountable for creating excellent leadership teams.

Set High Expectations

More respondents in the highly and moderately supportive districts said their districts stress high expectations of students than in minimally supportive districts. (See Table 3.) While approximately 80 percent of respondents from highly and moderately supportive districts offered comments indicative of high expectations, less than half of respondents from minimally supportive districts offered such statements.

Table 3
Comments Indicating High Expectations

District Level of Support	Percentage of Respondents Indicating High Expectations*	Total Number of Comments	Average Comments per Respondent
High	80%	28	2.80
Moderate	89	13	1.44
Minimal	38	13	0.81

* Note for this and all similar tables in this report: There were 10 total interview respondents in the group of highly supportive districts, nine respondents in the group of moderately supportive districts and 16 respondents in the group of minimally supportive districts.

The district with the strongest emphasis on high expectations, Abel County, has a succinct and powerful mission statement: “Striving for excellence — no exceptions, no excuses.” Mission statements in education have become ubiquitous, but this district has succeeded in turning the mission statement into a district culture. All four respondents from Abel County made clear references to setting high expectations, with an average of 4.25 references per interview. The other districts in the study averaged fewer than two references to high expectations, and only four of 31 other respondents referenced high expectations as many as three times in their interviews. Abel County has embraced high expectations and recognized that gaps in achievement often are the result of lower classroom expectations for some students.[‡] The superintendent of Abel County said this about high expectations:

“It’s just the belief in this district that all kids are going to learn. And you hear a lot of people saying that, but we really believe it. ... I think it’s just a matter of being very diligent about dealing with kids in the most effective way and recognizing the fact that we’re their opportunity for success. ... Our administrators have really, really worked hard to get that done. Our teachers have worked hard to get that done. It’s just an attitude of, ‘We’re their hope, and we’re there for them, and we have to do whatever it takes to be sure they stay in school.’ ”

In contrast, seven of the minimally supportive districts’ 13 comments representing high expectations were provided by a single respondent. Clearly, that one respondent believed in the importance of setting high expectations, but **one person — no matter how passionate or skillful — cannot set the tone for an entire district.**

Examples of statements that indicate districts have high expectations include observations that districts can set goals for themselves beyond *No Child Left Behind* or state requirements:

- *“There’s also nothing preventing us from going above and beyond.”*
- *“Even though [the goal for] No Child Left Behind is 100 percent for reading and math by 2013–2014, we’re actually aspiring to go toward 100 percent in all subject areas.”*

Other interviewees evidenced higher expectations through district increases in participation in and performance on Advanced Placement (AP) tests. Over the last four years, one of the districts has more than tripled the number of AP tests its students take and now has more students scoring at least a 3 and qualifying for college credit.

Minimally supportive districts tend to set low expectations by focusing most of their time and energy on strategies for helping students meet minimum AYP requirements, rather than teaching an accelerated curriculum using engaging instructional strategies to prepare more students for success in college, advanced training or a good job. ACT Inc. recently provided an example of the gap between the skills most high school students have and the skills they should be gaining to be ready for college. It reported that only 23 percent of the nation’s high school graduating class of 2009 is prepared for college in all four areas covered by the ACT.⁵

In a climate of minimum expectations, student achievement fails to improve and often declines. An over-emphasis on test preparation to meet minimum standards often results in only small achievement gains, but ultimately disengages students. **Less supportive districts often are so focused on meeting**

[‡] The 2008 *HSTW* Assessment survey data for this district showed counter-intuitive results for high expectations: in 2008, only 23 percent of students reported evidence of what they considered to be high expectations. This is despite the fact that collectively they scored at the 85th percentile in reading, 84th percentile in math and 76th percentile in science on the 2008 *HSTW* Assessment. It is possible that high expectations have become normalized for students in the district.

minimum standards that they fail to articulate a vision of higher expectations and to provide strategic support for school leadership teams using a more balanced approach to improve the achievement and motivation of all students.

Highly supportive districts more often realize that the minimal standards represented by AYP requirements are not sufficient to prepare students for college or advanced training. Accordingly, they set high expectations that challenge students to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills they will need, SREB interviews showed. Supportive districts more often have a strategic vision of accelerated learning for all groups of students aimed at meeting higher-than-required standards, because too many students fail to graduate from high school and to prepare for college and career training.

Setting and maintaining high expectations sometimes means making tough decisions to remove employees who are not able or willing to perform at necessary levels because they lack expertise or beliefs that all groups of students can achieve at higher levels and meet college- and career-readiness standards. The superintendent in one of the highly supportive districts said that some school leaders had to be removed early in his tenure because they lacked the commitment and skill set needed to create a high-performing learning culture. He said that a sign the district had developed higher expectations for students and adults came when the teachers in a school approached their principal about an incompetent teacher and insisted that something be done. The superintendent in the other highly supportive district identified in this study emphasized his commitment to giving his principals the autonomy, flexibility and support necessary to lead their own schools. He indicates by word and action that he is doing everything he can to set them up for success, and to hold them accountable for good results.

The superintendent in Broad County told a story about an underperforming high school science department and his having to replace the entire department. Getting a commitment from school principals and teacher-leaders to teach all groups of students sometimes requires more than resources — it requires a willingness to make difficult decisions. At the same time, a necessary precondition for meaningful accountability is a district emphasis on building capacity and providing support to principals and their school leadership teams.



Getting a commitment from school principals and teacher-leaders to teach all groups of students beyond minimum expectations sometimes requires more than resources — it also requires a willingness to make difficult decisions.

Focus on Student Achievement

The challenge of focusing intently on student achievement is deceptively difficult for school district leaders, interviews showed. Day-to-day distractions of running a district or school can whittle away at the central focus on improving schools. As one assistant superintendent of a high-performing district observed: “... it’s all a matter of personal choice of what you focus on, anyhow. You can let menial tasks ... dominate much of your life, as much of your time as you want.”

Thus, the first job of the district should be helping principals focus their attention on improving student achievement and learning. A focus on motivating and engaging students in learning and achievement can become an individual mandate that all educators follow — from the superintendent to the classroom teacher.⁶ The focus on students’ intellectual and academic growth can become a matter of teachers’ self-regulation rather than a response to external pressure as the district establishes benchmarks to ensure that students are on track to graduate from high school prepared for college and careers.

Expect Hard Work

The superintendent in Abel County acknowledged that raising student achievement takes a great deal of work — with no shortcuts or magic solutions: “We have worked hard here ... and I’m talking about the administrators and the teachers and our board.” Another respondent in the district observed that when the test scores — which are usually good — come in, “there’s about 10 minutes of celebrating and then we get on to the next year.” The district recognizes that the challenge of educating all students to higher levels is continuous.

Engage in Strategic Planning

High expectations and a focus on student achievement are critical supports to expect from district leadership, but they are not enough by themselves. **Simply raising the bar every year does not constitute a strategic plan for improvement.** Districts that have demonstrated success can point to a strategic planning process that supports principals in their work. As one superintendent said, “I don’t think we can sit back and leave it up to the schools.”

The Archer County superintendent said that when he arrived, his district had failed to meet AYP in recent years because of low performance by English-language learners and special education students. Even when the problem had been clearly defined, the district had developed no strategic plan to address those shortcomings.

Under the superintendent’s leadership, the district contracted with an external consulting group to develop a comprehensive strategic plan. The development of the plan involved all stakeholders and began with an examination of underlying beliefs and goals, followed by the development of strategies to meet those goals. The process identified nine strategies for the district to implement, each of which was further broken out into a number of concrete actions.

District Improvement Strategies Identified by Archer County

- Strategy I:** We will design and create learning opportunities that will allow each student to reach his/her highest level of achievement.
- Strategy II:** We will expose all students to experiences and opportunities that will enable them to pursue limitless aspirations.
- Strategy III:** We will provide support systems for all students that enable them to achieve their highest potential.
- Strategy IV:** We will provide safe and orderly learning environments in order to enhance the potential of each student.
- Strategy V:** We will have safe and well-maintained facilities necessary to maximize teaching and learning.
- Strategy VI:** We will fully unify all stakeholders toward student success.
- Strategy VII:** We will embrace uniqueness and diversity in our community.
- Strategy VIII:** We will acquire necessary resources to accomplish our mission and objectives.
- Strategy IX:** We will provide the highest quality instructional, support, and administrative staff that will embrace, facilitate, and celebrate our mission and objectives.

Two of the most important outcomes of Archer County's process were the creation of a student services department in the district and a safety-net program. A new cabinet-level position was created to address cohesively the districts' gaps in advisement, counseling and student services. The safety-net program was developed to provide principals with resources to turn their schools around. (For more details, see the discussion of Strategy 6 later in the report.)

Archer County's strategic planning process provides a model for principals to emulate as they develop a strategic plan at the school level to address critical problems. The process used to create the district's strategic plan ensured that the plan would guide improvements in the district. The plan:

- was created in response to a clear need.
- was prepared with substantial community and school-based leaders' involvement.
- became the basis of school strategic planning.
- became the basis for expectations of and the evaluation of principals.
- resulted in significant changes in the central office organization.
- resulted in significant changes in resource allocation.
- continues to be monitored and evaluated quarterly and, if necessary, revised by the school board.

Unfortunately, many strategic plans fail to achieve the success of the Archer plan because they either become too rigid, restricting principals' ability to make changes, or exist only on paper and fail to guide any changes. A respondent from Archer who had worked in the district for 11 years said that earlier in his tenure, the strategic plans "went into a three-ring binder" and went unused; but more recently they had become "something everybody lives and works daily — and that's how we've achieved the success we've achieved."

Cultivate Effective School Boards

School boards usually are the elected leaders of education in each district. Members of school boards are not necessarily education experts, but the public has placed its confidence in board members and expects them to provide effective leadership. The school board must be involved in developing a strategic framework for school improvement, and the board must be focused on and supportive of implementation. The following extended comments from a board member of a highly supportive district provide a snapshot of a well-functioning school board:

“I think the best support we can provide as a board is to set clear goals and expectations for this system. If we don’t have clear goals and expectations for this system, then I think that negatively impacts the principal. ...

“We cannot be a divided board. We may disagree; but when we go out into the community, we need to be of the same accord and sing the same song, because if people look at our board as a divided board, then that will negatively impact the principals.

“We agree to disagree and we agree to support the majority. We may disagree with the majority, but once that disagreement is voted on, it’s over. ... I think that’s been part of our success.”

The board member in the preceding example described a culture that deliberately takes politics out of education. Taken alone, the above comments could give an impression that minority viewpoints are squashed or pushed to the side. However, when considered with comments from the interviews with district leaders, they suggest the board has devoted time and effort to achieve a common vision based upon consensus, and the leaders in the district refuse to let smaller groups with strong opinions hijack that common vision.

This school board records all of its meetings for review to make sure that more of its meeting time is spent on student achievement and academics and less on real-estate and personnel issues. This self-accountability on the part of the board sends an unambiguous message to the superintendent, the principals and classroom teachers about the districts’ priorities and values.

The unified culture and vision of this successful district — one with much demographic diversity — starkly contrasts to the responses from leaders in some of the minimally supportive districts, where central-office staff and school board members’ answers differed so greatly that they could have been describing different school systems.

Board members in the minimally supportive districts were less focused on student achievement, did not have confidence in central office personnel, and did not trust that they were being given all details of student and system performance. The school boards in these districts find themselves refereeing disputes, rather than focusing on effective school and classroom practices. **Board members in minimally supportive districts seem more focused on solving problems brought to their attention, rather than developing a strategic framework, mission, goals and effective practices that hold district and school leadership responsible for owning and solving the problems.**⁷ The following comments illustrate this lack of focus on district improvement:

- *“I hear no conversation of any kind, at any board meeting, on any agenda items that are directed at a better job of meeting the future.”*
- *“There is a shared vision, but I think different people see different pieces of the vision, as opposed to everybody seeing the whole vision ... and that is arguably what creates tension ... within the staff.”*

These comments reflect disengagement from the task of creating a strategic framework that the board, the district and schools can use to solve problems. **Interviews showed that principals are better supported when their school boards and superintendents share a common framework, guiding principles, mission, goals and values that enable them to work together to help more students from all groups achieve at higher levels.**

All of the interviews reinforced research on best school board practices that stress the superintendents' role in setting direction and creating a healthy climate for the district.⁸ Because the school board members are elected or appointed and may not have experience in education, the superintendent must bear the responsibility for providing the board with thoughtful, research-based recommendations for improving school curriculum and instruction, enabling the board to make good policy decisions. Furthermore, with instructional expertise and a single voice, a superintendent can communicate a unified vision for the district more easily than even the most team-oriented school board.⁹ While the board can and should be involved in defining the district's vision and setting policy, it is the superintendent who executes the plan. As one board member said, "I need to give [the superintendent] resources and support to get him where he needs to go. But he's the one responsible to get there, not the board. I don't want to take that from him."

In the highly supportive districts, board members were quick to give credit for positive movement to their district superintendents. Where school boards were functioning well, the superintendent often had provided training or other support for board members to help them with their work. Furthermore, the praise flowed both ways. In the highly and moderately supportive districts, eight of 17 central-office respondents (47 percent) said their systems received strong support from their school boards. In the minimally supportive districts, only one of 13 central-office respondents (8 percent) described strong support from the school boards.

Strategy 2: Organize and engage the school board and district office in support of each school.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Organize the central office — including human resources, finance, curriculum and instruction — to function cohesively to support principals and school leadership teams. The district hires a staff that fits the needs of school strategic plans, assists principals to remove ineffective teachers and, either through central-office staff or consultants, provides technical expertise to schools in implementing their own strategic improvement plans.
- Focus not on micro-managing schools, but on developing school principals' and staffs' capacity to implement their school's strategic improvement plan successfully.
- Establish a collaborative presence in the schools, focused on building the capacity of principals and teachers to own school problems and to implement proven solutions.