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WESTERN STATES BENCHMARKING CONSORTIUM

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE: IT'S ALL ABOUT LEADERSHIP

The challenges for America's schools in the second half of the twentieth century rightfully centered on providing children with equalities of educational access and opportunity. Visionary school leaders spearheaded the societal struggle to replace an education system segregated by race and handicapping condition with one that offered every child the opportunity to learn.

In the last fifteen years, the educational leadership focus has, of necessity, shifted from insuring universal access to realizing universal proficiency. Higher expectations and accountability to assure learning success for each student have presented unprecedented challenges to transform our education system. Today, school leaders must skillfully harness and focus organizational energy to meet these challenges, recognizing the district as the practical unit for sustained, systemic change. These leaders are the catalyst for changes that must occur if we are to realize the goal of every child making *significant* learning gains every year.

The Western States Benchmarking Consortium's (WSBC) efforts portray a systemic vision of excellence in public education and the WSBC "benchmarks" define progress points along the way. But achieving excellence does not come easily. Broadly based, skillful and committed leadership—from the board room to the class room—is an absolute imperative to achieve exemplary status across the four strategic areas defined by the WSBC member districts.

This document describes the leadership beliefs, behaviors, actions and results necessary to move from “good to great”—and to achieve exemplary status as a public school system. And while successful educational leadership comes in many forms, it is driven by certain common beliefs, commitments, and skills that achieve demonstrable results in student and system performance. These are described in greater detail below in five critical areas:

- *Personal beliefs and commitments about improving learning*
- *An intense focus on key organizational transformations to achieve learning improvement*
- *Skills in guiding organizational transformations*
- *Active participation and influence in the creation of policy regarding public education*
- *The ability to show evidence of successful transformations that improve learning for all students*

Personal Beliefs and Commitments about Improving Learning

Exemplary leaders are value-driven and are characterized by:

- *High ethical standards*
- *A commitment and daily sense of responsibility to improve learning for all students, staff, the broader community, and oneself*
- *A deep sense of the higher purpose (calling) inherent in educational leadership and a compelling belief that public education is the key leverage point for democracy’s future success*
- *A strong sense of humility (and tempering of ego)—with an understanding that leadership is not about personal power but is the moral touchstone for the purposes of public education*
- *A nagging dissatisfaction with current levels of performance – a deeply felt belief that the leader’s role is to bring about improvements, not maintain the status quo*
- *A commitment to lead and support necessary innovations and transformations to achieve improved learning*

- *A self-assured, positive, and collaborative approach to problem-solving*
- *A clearly articulated mission and direction, and a modeling of the values of the organization that influence the aspirations of those who are served (values such as a commitment to constant improvement and a results orientation.)*
- *Clear expectations for and evaluation of system-wide, ongoing community engagement, which is clearly aimed at improving student learning.*

An Intense Focus on Key Organizational Transformations to Achieve Learning Improvement

Superintendents and Boards of Education play key roles in setting policies to transform school systems to achieve excellence in learning for all students. These policies are the thoughtful plans for excellence. Such policies and plans require everyone on the policy-making and administrative teams to focus together on:

- *Communicating broadly to develop a shared vision*—communicating well, while listening carefully, in a wide variety of venues, and often exerting extra effort to clarify a vision for the future of the system.
 - *Community building*—engendering a strong sense of community responsibility and partnership for improvement, both within and outside the school system. These school leaders are valued more broadly as community leaders and provide the primary intellectual backdrop for the communities’ understanding of schooling. They frequently are recognized for their contributions to the community’s quality of life.
 - *Creating coherence across the system*—aligning learning targets, the curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the policies and organizational structures and practices that support them. Leaders create and refine the infrastructure of schooling.
 - *Capacity development*—demonstrating persistence, modeling, skillful coaching, and succession-planning to develop broad-based leadership across the system. Skillful leaders energize the necessary will and skill to focus all organizational actions, processes and structures directly on the mission of improving learning—not just on the needs of the organization. They nurture innovation and guide and protect their “champions of change” from organizational inertia.
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- *Continuous improvement*—requiring that they and others across the system are guided by ongoing skillful uses of data to inform both strategic and practical daily decisions.

Skills in Directing and Guiding Organizational Transformation

By definition, exemplary leaders possess wide-ranging skills to implement the goals and action plans that will lead to success for all. These skills include the ability to:

- *Exemplify a strategic sense of “timing”*—anticipating future challenges and opportunities and conducting continuous environmental scanning to determine when to initiate, modify or delay key change strategies. Exemplary leaders know how to manage organizational energy and determine what is possible (and not possible or practical) in the development of human knowledge, skills, and talents.
- *Manage the improvement of student learning and organizational improvement in an era of more limited resources*--confronting dilemmas and resolving them in positive ways.
- *Gain and sustain commitment from others*—recognizing that the committed actions of many are necessary to bring about meaningful and lasting change. Exemplary leaders understand the power and empowerment of distributed leadership as they mobilize district personnel and delegate leadership to accomplish the mission of the district.
- *Lead productive Human Resource development strategies*--aligning staff selection, development, and retention with the goal of keeping the best possible teachers (and support staff) with students. Leaders link professional development with performance appraisal as a part of a natural cycle of individual and organizational growth.
- *Take risks as leaders*—willing to go “on point” in creating systemic transformations to improve both student and system performance.
- *Support others to take risks*—creating incentives and rewards to foster and nurture a culture of innovation across all levels and functions in the system and an ability to move others beyond their “comfort zones” through disciplined thought and action.
- *Use technology as a key leverage point*—understanding the enhancement of productivity and the “multiplier effect” that a sophisticated technology structure can bring to the realization of organization goals.

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Active Participation in Public Policy Regarding Public Education

Exemplary leaders:

- *Participate in local, state, and federal policy development work*
- *Deploy key district employees to monitor and participate in state board of education /agency initiatives*
- *Initiate legislative activity and organize ongoing legislative engagement of the community in support of the public education enterprise.*
- *Exemplify an integrated approach to advocacy of public education –in concert with the leaders in other districts, both locally and nationally*
- *Engineer and implement a comprehensive marketing plan addressing both local and general education issues--employing a multi-media approach with print, electronic, broadcast and Web outlets.*

Ability to Show Evidence That Successful Transformations Are Improving Learning for All Students

Exemplary leaders understand the primacy of results and can draw on multiple sources of evidence to show that:

- *“Student achievement and development are high or steadily improving in all schools with equitable outcomes for students” (Lambert, Linda. Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement. ASCD, 2003, p. 81)*
- *There is in place a systemic “...inquiry-based accountability system inform(ing) decision making and practice at classroom, school, and district levels” (Lambert, Ibid.)*
- *Best practice research findings and longitudinal and multiple data-bases are used to monitor progress and to determine and improve the relationship among inputs, processes and outcomes across the system.*

The districts that make up the Western States Benchmarking Consortium understand the legitimacy and necessity of holding universal proficiency as the standard for judging excellence in schooling. And for these districts, achieving excellence is all about leadership.