

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT



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Sustained and well-designed leadership development is essential in school systems that desire high-quality teaching and learning for all students in all classrooms. Such leadership development prepares leaders to be *instructional* and to create school cultures that promote continuous improvements in teaching and learning and surround both young people and adults with supportive relationships.

The pressures created by high standards and testing requirements and the guidance provided by long-range planning are insufficient in themselves to continuously improve teaching and learning across a school system. Instead, such improvements will occur through the development of teamwork, “real time” professional learning, and the creation of system and school cultures in which new ideas and practices can grow and flourish. Without teamwork and sustained



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It is critically important that teamwork and high-quality professional learning begin at the highest leadership levels in a school system and that district leaders be fully committed to and engaged in their own development. Significant change throughout the system requires that leaders be willing and able to change their own beliefs, understanding, and actions.

The kind of team-based “real time” professional learning I advocate for leaders is very different from the “sit-and-get” sessions still commonly experienced by the vast majority of school and district administrators. Such activities—which sometimes are little more than a series of speakers who offer their viewpoints on a variety of subjects—are often markedly separate from leaders’ core day-to-day responsibilities, seldom build on one another to develop complex understandings and skills, do little to promote teamwork within the school system, and reinforce the mistaken notion that good staff development is a series of “presenters” who “convey” ideas and research to relatively passive recipients.

I BELIEVE

Based on more than 40 years of experience as an educator (with more than 30 of those years dedicated to the field of professional learning), my careful reading of the professional literature in education and related fields, and conversations with thousands of administrators and teachers from a variety of settings, I have acquired a number of beliefs about leadership and leadership development. I offer these beliefs in the spirit of dialogue as propositions for leadership development. I encourage leaders to examine their own “truths” in these areas and to consider their implications for their day-to-day learning and actions.

- *I believe that significant improvements in teaching and learning for all students begin with significant change in leaders.* Therefore, leadership development focuses on affecting what leaders believe, understand, say, and do each day. Leadership development is sufficiently robust that it literally changes the brains of leaders as they

acquire new beliefs, deepen their understanding of important subjects, and develop new habits.

- *I believe that the quality of relationships in schools profoundly affects the quality of teaching and learning.* Therefore, leadership development creates relationships among leaders that inspire hope rather than resignation, provides support in implementing new practices, and inspires the courage necessary to consistently act in ways that promote the welfare of all young people.

- *I believe that individuals working interdependently in teams pursuing goals that stretch their capacities can accomplish far more than individuals working alone.* Therefore, leadership development engages leaders in genuine teamwork based on ambitious goals for student learning as a primary means of continuous improvement that overcomes the centrifugal forces of professional isolation.

- *I believe that if all students are to experience high-quality teaching and learning and be surrounded by supportive relationships, so too must their teachers be surrounded by such relationships and experience continuous “real time” professional learning.* Therefore, leadership development equips leaders with the knowledge and skills to create high-performance teams and to embed professional learning in teachers’ daily work lives.

- *I believe that continuous improvements in teaching and learning require that leaders create cultures of clarity, cohesion, integrity, candor, teamwork, trust, and interpersonal accountability.* Therefore, leadership development cultivates those qualities in and among leaders so that they, in turn, can lead in the creation of such cultures in schools.

- *I believe that leaders’ authenticity and integrity are among their most important leadership “tools.”* Therefore, leadership development promotes leaders’ understanding of their most important values, purposes, and ideas. Likewise, leadership development supports leaders’ ability to act with high levels of integrity so that their words and actions are widely and deeply respected.

- *I believe that leaders’ interior lives are a source of inspiration and guidance.* Therefore, leadership development equips leaders with

reflective techniques such as journal writing and reading of biographies and provides methods by which leaders can still their minds to increase awareness of deeper sources of wisdom and knowing.



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- *I believe that leaders’ feelings are contagious and affect the emotional welfare of the organizations they lead.* Therefore, leadership development supports leaders in developing a sense of appreciation and hopefulness and in leading from their strengths and “best selves.”

- *I believe that effective leadership is a matter of heart and spirit as well as the head.* Therefore, leadership development enables leaders to speak from both their hearts and heads about their values, purposes, and ideas, to the hearts and heads of the school community rather than through the exercise of force and fear.

- *I believe that the vast majority of leaders know more about effective leadership than they regularly practice.* Therefore, leadership development provides opportunities for leaders to identify prior knowledge and to set goals to translate that knowledge into new habits of mind and behavior.

- *I believe that leadership is primarily an expression of numerous habits of mind and behavior.* Therefore, leadership development provides opportunities for leaders to practice new ways of thinking and acting until they become habitual.

- *I believe that learning is most powerful when “doing” is integrated into the learning process.* Therefore, most leadership development occurs as leaders engage with their peers in the core tasks of their work—for instance, visiting classrooms to ascertain the quality of student learning, talking with teachers about teaching, or leading learning-oriented meetings.

- *I believe that leaders’ assumptions and conceptual frameworks have a large effect on their day-to-day practice, often in ways that are invisible.* Therefore, leadership development assists leaders in surfacing

their current assumptions and frameworks and in altering them to support the achievement of organizational goals.

- *I believe that dialogue-based conversations are a powerful and underused means of promoting professional learning and collaboration.* Therefore, leadership development teaches the skills of committed listening—a fundamental quality of learning-oriented conversations—and of surfacing assumptions in the spirit of mutual learning and influence.

- *I believe that the solutions to most problems of teaching and learning require creation and invention rather than prescription or duplication.* Therefore, leadership development promotes attitudes and habits of mind that enable flexible thinking and the conceptualization of alternative futures.

- *I believe that improvement is ultimately about turning ideas into a stream of actions that produce intended results.* Therefore, leadership development cultivates the habit of consistently moving learning and planning into action to continuously close the gaps between what is known and intended and what is done.

Because I believe that the overarching and intertwined moral purposes of schools are to enable all students to develop to their full potential and to create the next generation of informed and engaged world citizens, I want all leaders to possess the understanding and skills necessary to serve as members and leaders of the high-functioning teams that are essential in creating such schools. And because I believe that what leaders understand, say, and do each day matters, I feel strongly that the kind of learning I have described is a matter of the utmost importance and urgency.