Implications from UCEA

successful leadership in high poverty, urban schools

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Research shows that leadership matters in improving student achievement. In fact, among school-related factors over which policy makers have some control, effective leadership practices rank second only to the quality of teaching in influencing student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Quality leadership is particularly important in schools serving youngsters living in high poverty urban schools (Scheerens & Bosker, 1997).

What are the practices of successful leaders of high poverty, urban schools?

Much of the available leadership practice research focuses on improved elementary schools. Leithwood and Riehl (2005), in their research review, showed that direction setting, developing people and redesigning organizations are core leadership practices necessary, though not sufficient, for school success regardless of context. A recent study of successful leadership in three high poverty urban elementary schools supports this contention; finding that the principals examined all exhibited these core practices (Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson & Ylimaki, 2007). These principals set and maintained a clear direction that focused explicitly on the educational needs of the students and schools they served. Each exerted a strong, positive influence on people's willingness to follow. All three were passionate about making a difference in the lives of poor children and purposefully assumed leadership of schools with high needs and limited resources.

The principals' enthusiasm was accompanied by persistence, commitment and optimism, and they leveraged external accountability demands such as NCLB annual progress expectations to overcome resistance among teachers, particularly those who questioned the academic abilities of students living in poverty. They focused on improving the school's learning environment, with an early emphasis on creating a physically safe and nurturing atmosphere. They applied pressure early in the process to encourage adherence, and then used whatever resources they could generate to engage teachers in professional dialogue and development. They also worked hard to involve parents and other community members in school activities and decision-making. Reconnecting a school to its community is absolutely central to these types of school improvement efforts (Jacobson, et al. 2007; Johnson, 2007).

How does the nature of leadership influence school improvement?

Available school improvement research shows that leadership practices directly and indirectly influence organizational culture and conditions. Research on In Chicago, researchers found that having a student-centered learning climate and ambitious instruction were critical to improved achievement (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006). Simlarly, Sweetland and Hoy (2000) underscored the influence of "academic press" (i.e., a stress on academics by students and teachers, resource support, and principal influence) to be highly correlated with schools' math and reading achievement scores. Both studies found that teachers' professional capacity, their empowerment to make curriculum and instruction decisions, and their view of the school as a professional community to be both critical and under the influence of the principal.

Reviews of research on school improvement and reform research confirmed that leadership of improving schools also positively influences: the focus on teaching and learning, an information-rich environment, school culture, the development of a learning community, continuous professional development, parental involvement, and external support and resources (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). These findings are consistent with findings from the Effective Schools literature (Rosenholtz, 1985) and other more recent leadership studies conducted in high poverty urban schools Ylimaki, Jacobson & Drysdale, 2008).

What are the district conditions that support leadership for in high poverty urban schools?
Qualitative research on urban leaders shows that the scope and nature of district support positively influence effective leader actions (Osterman & Sullivan, 1996). Some urban districts are offering support in collaboration with local universities through improved leadership preparation, new principal induction and mentoring, and focused leadership development (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2007). By creating a continuum of leadership education, tailored to local challenges and priorities, their school leaders are more likely to exercise effective leadership practices and school improvement strategies.

Implications
Coupled with the fact that high quality leaders are perceived to be in relatively short supply in urban school systems (Jacobson, 2005), we need to incorporate what we know about the passion, commitments and practices of successful leaders into principal preparation and district support . Through joint effort and informed action, preparation programs and districts can improve the quality and effectiveness of school leaders for the schools (and students) who need effective leadership most.

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