

IMPLICATIONS FROM UCEA

DISTRICT-DRIVEN SUCCESS: RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LARGE-SCALE REFORM



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Why study district-driven success?

Research on how to improve the quality of education for all students and reduce academic achievement gaps has primarily focused on individual schools (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). In contrast, the research published on successful district-driven strategies and processes has been comparatively sparse (Honig & Copland, 2008). To sustain long-term innovation, systems must change (Simmons, 2006) and researchers have begun to focus on district-driven reform efforts which have led to increases in student achievement (Cuban & Usdan, 2003). Key elements found to have contributed to district-driven success initiatives have been identified through several studies (Cawelti, 2001; Green & Etheridge, 2001; Kim & Crasco, 2006; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

What does research reveal about district-driven reform efforts that have contributed to improved student achievement results?

The findings from research on district-driven success reveal similar elements. Districts that have successfully closed achievement gaps have employed processes that include creation of a demanding culture, development of shared mission and vision supported by planning and goals; strategic allocation of resources; capacity building; alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment; and expansion of partnerships. Leaders in these studied districts have also demonstrated the courage and commitment to continuously engage in the difficult work of comprehensive system-wide reform and improvement.

Successful districts create a demanding culture (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004) focused on equity and learning (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). This demanding culture requires a shift in beliefs and behaviors. District-level leaders embrace their responsibility for student achievement, nurture shared beliefs about learning, set high expectations for all students and focus on results (Cawelti, 2001; Green & Etheridge, 2001; Honig & Copland, 2008; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Campus personnel are not expected to improve student achievement in isolation. Successful districts develop a shared mission and vision supported by strategic planning at all levels of the organization and deployed through coordinated actions designed to achieve specific measurable goals (Simmons, 2006). In order to achieve classroom-level and individual student achievement gains, financial resources are allocated to meet critical objectives (Kim & Crasco, 2006). Additional assistance is channeled to the lowest performing schools (Snipes & Casserly, 2004).

Successful districts intentionally develop the capacity of their people. Teachers, principals, and central office staff are viewed as valuable resources and provided effective, ongoing, job-embedded professional development to support changes in learning (Kim & Crasco, 2006; Snipes & Casserly, 2004). Curriculum, instruction and assessment are aligned at the district, rather than the campus, level. Based on high standards and a commitment to achievement for all students (Cawelti, 2001; Green & Etheridge, 2001; Kim & Crasco, 2006), quality, coherent instruction is

delivered through researched methods at every campus site (Kim & Crasco, 2006; Simmons, 2006). These coherent district-supported learning systems are further supported through re-definition of the role of central office staff to support campus improvement (Honig & Copland, 2008; Snipes & Casserly, 2004) and individual student achievement (Cawelti, 2001).

Successful districts do not work in isolation: district leaders actively pursue partnerships and plan for collaboration with key stakeholders including parents (Simmons, 2006), businesses, community-based organizations, universities, (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004), school board members (Snipes & Casserly, 2004) and unions (Green & Etheridge, 2001). These partnerships, and the products developed through these partnerships, are not left to chance. The needs of both the district and partners are assessed (Simmons, 2006) and district leaders strategically engage partners that can support the goals of the district (Honig & Copland, 2008).

While many of the elements associated with successful district-driven reform can be learned and replicated, the final component requires personal dedication: it is the courage and commitment to begin the reform effort and carry it out in spite of setbacks encountered along the way (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Implications

The research on district-driven reform has identified common elements. The processes required to bring the scale of successful reform efforts to the district level requires sustained, focused collaboration and hard work (O'Doherty, 2007). District leaders work alongside staff, parents, and community partners to create an environment that supports the capacity for reform (Snipes & Casserly, 2004) challenges the beliefs and behaviors of individuals (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004) and provides the resources to initiate and sustain change (Simmons, 2006).

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