

**LEADERSHIP AS LEARNING:
Closing the achievement gap by improving instruction
through content-focused leadership**

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The Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington exists to eliminate the achievement gap that divides students along the lines of race, class, and language. CEL believes that the achievement gap will be eliminated only when the quality of instruction improves, and that instruction will only improve at scale when leaders better understand what powerful instruction looks like in order to lead and guide professional development, target and align resources, engage in on-going problem solving and long-range capacity building.

CEL runs a variety of leadership programs in conjunction with the College of Education, provides technical assistance and customized leadership programs to schools and school districts, and maintains a small number of comprehensive school district partnerships. This paper focuses on those partnerships. It is organized into two parts. Part I outlines the partnership components which are based on the belief that powerful instructional leadership is the nexus for improving student achievement. Part II provides a summary of the research findings in three of the CEL partnerships to give the reader a better understanding of how the various components work together.

Part I: Partnership Components

The focus on leadership for instructional improvement has two distinct, but mutually reinforcing dimensions: (1) defining the instructional practices, structures, and routines that are conducive to powerful student learning and to the adult professional development that supports it; (2) honing the leadership practices and routines which support, nurture, and push the development of such practices across the district.

With these two dimensions in mind—“instructional practices” and “instructional leadership”—the overall theory of action guiding every CEL partnership has three basic footings (see appendix A):

1) The first footing is about *helping the system to get smarter about powerful instruction* and the leadership necessary to guide that instruction.

2) The second footing involves working directly with content coaches and teacher leaders at school sites with the aim of *connecting new learning to classroom practice*.

3) The third footing is about *ensuring the necessary policies, practices and structures are in place to support powerful instruction* by working directly with district level leaders to examine their own district contexts.

Whether in literacy or math, sustained, in-depth examination in one content area grounds leadership practice squarely within the work of instructional improvement; this ensures that the three footings of CEL's theory of action are closely aligned. The ultimate goal is for each district to seize upon its growing capacity to further develop and sustain its own learning.

HELPING THE SYSTEM GET SMARTER ABOUT POWERFUL INSTRUCTION

General Study Group Sessions for School and District Leaders

The *General Study Group Sessions* serve as a central component of the professional development partnership. The purpose of these sessions is two-fold: (1) to study high-quality instruction in a specific content area (literacy or mathematics) and (2) to define and refine the communication and instructional leadership strategies conducive to improving student achievement through high-quality instruction.

Participation in *General Study Group Sessions* is an expectation for all K-12 principals, assistant principals, literacy coaches, key teacher leaders, and central office leaders. The configuration of each study group depends on the size and needs of the particular district(s) involved. All *General Study Groups* are initially designed for district-wide participation. Over time, however, the configuration of the *General Study Groups* may change to meet the evolving needs of a district. Some districts, for example, have organized *General Study Groups* around particular grade-level bands (i.e. elementary and secondary).

General Study Groups meet for a series of one day sessions across the school year and are conducted by leaders in the field of literacy/mathematics instruction and instructional leadership. The goal of *General Study Group Sessions* is to support school and district leaders, instructional coaches and/or teacher leaders in their own learning of quality instruction and instructional leadership. Specifically, these sessions are aimed at helping participants:

- Recognize, articulate, and teach the critical attributes of powerful instruction
- Build pedagogical content knowledge
- Hone skills for curricular planning informed by knowledge of standards, curricular resources, pedagogical content, and ongoing assessment of student needs
- Develop shared language for talking about teaching and learning
- Develop specific leadership skills that can assist in the movement towards more powerful and effective instruction
- Cultivate an interdependent professional community for teachers and leaders

- Become more effective at planning, coaching, and collaborating with teachers in developing powerful instruction

The format of each session generally includes presentations of exemplary instructional practices; demonstrations of strategies with adult and student groups; time for individual/team/school planning with support of CEL coaches; sharing of professional development tools, resources, and texts to support the work.

While each *General Study Group Session* is built upon the needs of the district(s) and the work of the previous sessions, the scope of the *General Study Group Sessions*—regardless of content area focus—includes specific knowledge and skills which serve as the foundation for *Leadership* and *Instructional Coaching*. In terms of instructional practice these include:

- Learning environment/conditions for learning
- How people learn/developing pedagogical content knowledge
- Teaching in the zone of proximal development
- Supporting students towards increasing independence
- The role of modeling
- Meeting the needs of English language learners
- Data based inquiry
- Assessment driven instruction
- Using standards to inform curricular planning and instruction
- The crucial role of talk in learning

In terms of instructional leadership, general study group sessions might focus on any or all of the following:

- Communication
- Developing a “Teachable Point of View”
- Setting clear expectations
- Framing the work—articulating rationale for priorities, creating a sense of urgency, writing instructional letters, crafting openings and closings for meetings
- Critical inquiry
- Using school based data to determine student and teacher needs
- Using data as a leverage point
- Planning for professional development to support teachers’ growth
- Identifying teachers’ learning styles and needs
- Crafting feedback for teachers
- Developing the systems and structures to nurture and support professional learning
- Identifying and working with teacher leaders

Leadership Coaching

To apply the learning from *General Study Group Sessions* to leadership actions at the district or school level, *Leadership Coaching* is a key component of the CEL partnership.

All principals and their district office supervisors receive coaching from accomplished instructional leaders. The exact number of *Leadership Coaching* days is negotiated as part of the overall partnership contract, but a minimum of four days per person is recommended. The configuration of the leadership coaching is also negotiated as part of the contract. In some districts, principals receive coaching in dyads or triads. In other districts, coaching is one-on-one. In all cases, leadership coaching is school and district embedded, carried out in the actual context of leaders' work.

Facilitated instructional walkthroughs are one element of leadership coaching. Leaders utilize information from walkthroughs to deepen pedagogical content knowledge, analyze classroom instruction, ascertain the strengths and needs of teachers, support teacher growth, and plan professional development opportunities for individual, small groups, and whole staff learning.

CONNECTING NEW LEARNING TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Specialized Study Group Sessions for Coaches and Teacher Leaders

Approximately one day per month (commonly following the General Study Group Session) serves as an opportunity for additional study focused on the work of content coaches and/or teacher leaders. These sessions are intended to deepen their understanding of the content introduced at the General Study Group Sessions and to prepare them to work with colleagues at their own sites.

Specialized Study Group Sessions are designed to address an additional body of knowledge specific to the work of content coaching and professional development planning. Coaches and teacher leaders learn how to organize, develop, and sustain study groups in their respective schools and districts; how to structure coaching work with teachers; how to grow and utilize lab-site classrooms within and across schools; how to work with principals to plan for, stage, and deliver professional development; how to utilize video tapes and other resources for their own and others' learning and professional growth.

Instructional Coaching

Instructional Coaching or *Content Coaching* is an essential vehicle for connecting the learning from Study Group Sessions to classroom practice. The specific number of and configuration of coaching days is negotiated as part of the overall partnership contract; CEL Project Directors work with district leadership to make decisions about how to invest coaching resources to achieve the greatest impact.

CEL coaches spend approximately 1-4 days a month "on the ground" in schools with school and district teacher leaders. These coaching days extend the work of both the *General* and *Specialized Study Group Sessions* by providing teacher leaders with additional opportunities to "try on" new teaching strategies and to work with teachers in their classrooms—all with the support of an outside coach who models in classrooms, debriefs with teachers, co-teaches, co-plans, observes and provides feedback. *Instructional Coaching* may focus on developing pedagogical knowledge in a particular content area (literacy or math) or in the area of coaching and professional development itself.

Creating Existence Proofs

Whether through observing a coach model a lesson in a classroom, visiting schools with demonstrated success, or participating in professional development residencies in the classrooms of exemplary teachers, people need to see images of what is possible in order to develop a sense of urgency and deepen their commitment to the challenge of improving student achievement everyday, in all classrooms. When teachers see their own students—or students like them—engaged in rigorous, standard-bearing work, it elevates the expectations for what is possible.

To this end, CEL works with each partnership to design a plan for cultivating expertise among teachers, and creating existence proofs within each district. Some districts, for example, develop lab-site classrooms as places where teachers and coaches can “try on” new instructional strategies with support.

While districts are growing the necessary expertise within their systems, the Center for Educational Leadership connects them with a network of schools and districts across the country engaged in similar work. CEL orchestrates a variety of opportunities to learn from the experience of others through visitations to and residencies in exemplary schools and classrooms.

ENSURING THE NECESSARY POLICIES, PRACTICES AND STRUCTURES ARE IN PLACE TO SUPPORT POWERFUL INSTRUCTION

Leadership Conferences

The purpose of the *Leadership Conferences* is to provide an on-going venue for the application of the principles and practices learned with the *General Study Group* and *Leadership Coaching*. Regular meetings are scheduled over the school year with key central office leaders and principal representatives. These meetings are planned in consultation with the Project Director(s) from the Center for Educational Leadership. The extent to which the *Leadership Conferences* are facilitated by CEL representatives depends on the nature of the partnership; districts take on increasing responsibility for planning and leading the *Leadership Conferences* over time.

The aim of the *Leadership Conferences* is to (1) further flesh out and develop the school district’s professional development plan; (2) coordinate this effort between and among schools; (3) identify the systems level policies, practices and structures that need changing in order to improve instruction. The content of *Leadership Conferences* addresses how the district might develop its own “green house” for cultivating expertise among teachers, how to identify and utilize current teacher leadership that exemplifies high-quality instruction, and ongoing examination of their own instructional leadership skills.

Project Management

Each partnership is unique and the professional development needs of a district continually evolve with new learning. For this reason, each district partnership is managed by at least one Project Director from the Center for Educational Leadership. Initially, this person is instrumental in working with district leaders to develop the partnership contract, and to conceptualize how the various components will manifest and reinforce the three footings outlined above. The Project Director is the main interface between the district and CEL coaches and representatives.

As district leaders develop their own capacity, they become more adept at refining long-term goals and problem solving along the way. Over time, project management involves monitoring, reflecting on, negotiating and reconceptualizing the partnership work in response to identified goals. For example, the Project Director may work with district leaders to develop other learning opportunities such as specialized residencies in CEL's partnership schools, professional development attached to summer school for students, and intervisitations among partnership districts.

There is significant flexibility regarding how the various components of the partnership play out over time, provided that the basic footings of the theory of action are not compromised. While the Center for Educational Leadership remains open to the number of actual content and coaching days, as well as the specific content to be addressed, the partnership is contingent upon a district commitment to invest in learning opportunities and structures to help the system get smarter about instruction, connect new learning to the classroom, and ensure the necessary policies, practices and structures are in place to support powerful instruction.

Part II: Research Results

Researchers from the Center for Teaching and Policy Studies at the University of Washington have been studying three of CEL's partnerships for the last three years. Four separate research briefs have been published along with the full academic anchor paper. The research briefs and full papers are available at www.k-12leadership.org. This section provides a brief summary of those research findings. Overall findings of significance include:

- Principals and district coaches have improved in their ability to analyze instruction and provide specific and meaningful feedback to teachers.
- Teacher practice improves when administrators and coaches deepen their pedagogical content knowledge and learn how to provide content focused leadership.
- An increase in student learning is influenced by focused and intentional instructional leadership.

Research Brief I: September 2006

A partnership for improving instruction

Highline (WA) School District

(See: *The Pedagogy of Third-Party Support for Instructional Improvement*:

A Partnership between the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) and Highline School District, Gallucci, Chrysan; Boatright, Beth; Lynse, Dan; Swinnerton, Julie. October 2005.)

A primary area of CEL instruction at Highline School District was teaching leaders how to become instructional leaders: to understand and recognize powerful instruction, lead and guide professional development, target and align resources, engage in problem-solving, and build the capacity of teachers. CEL used a variety of teaching methods: consultations, coaching, instructional visits in district classrooms, site visits to observe best practices, and the application of the tenets of powerful instruction in a specific content area.

Highline leaders learned to change their view of their own roles as leaders, and consequently, changed how they used their time. Their understanding of what constitutes professional development changed as well. Principals, building coaches, and teachers all learned in greater depth about how to teach reading and how to apply both their content and instructional knowledge in observations, classroom coaching, and lesson planning. After these interventions, consultants also observed a change in how teachers presented lessons in the classroom.

Research Brief II: November 2006

Aiming High: Leadership for District-wide Instructional Improvement

Norwalk-LaMirada (CA) School District

(See: *A Partnership between the Center for Educational Leadership and Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District - Interim Research Report and Case Summary*, Gallucci, Chrysan; Swanson, Judy. October 2006)

Norwalk-LaMirada School District formed a partnership with CEL to reinforce its focus on literacy instruction through developing leaders' pedagogical content knowledge and instructional leadership knowledge and skills.

After two years of partnership, student test scores and commentary from district leaders, literacy coaches, and teachers all pointed to changes in students' reading.

Over a period of two years, English/Language Arts test scores increased at every grade level. Researchers cautioned against causal claims that the initiative is responsible for test score gains, but noted "the trend is definitely in the right direction."

A promising indicator of the initiative's impact was found in test scores drawn from demonstration classrooms where coaching was provided. Student test scores trended higher in those classrooms compared to scores of students in classrooms without such coaching support.

Research Brief III: March 2007

Improving Instruction: Developing the Knowledge and Skills of School Leaders

Norwalk-: La Mirada (CA) Unified School District and Marysville (WA) School District

(See: *Developing District-wide Expertise in Leaders' Ability to Analyze and Improve Instructional Practice*, Copland, Michael; Blum, Dina. January 2007.)

The more an administrator or district coach knows about subject content and pedagogy (how to teach), the more expert his or her analysis of instruction is likely to be, leading to greater impact as a leader in influencing teacher practice. CEL worked in partnership with these two districts to help school leaders increase their knowledge of what was being taught and their capacity to identify if it was being taught well.

Concluding that principals and district coaches in both districts improved in their ability to analyze instruction and plan comments to teachers on their observations, the researchers cautioned against making causal links between the intervention and the outcomes. However, “the gains observed in the data,” they said, “are consistent with the instructional and leadership coaching interventions provided by CEL.”

Research Brief IV: May 2007

Gaining traction through professional coaching

Highline School District

(See: *A Partnership between the Center for Educational Leadership*

and Highline School District - Interim Research Report #2, Gallucci, Chrysan; Boatright, Beth. February 2007.)

Coaching as a strategy to improve classroom instruction has been embraced by the Highline School District through its partnership with CEL. Teachers at elementary and high schools reflect on what happens in their classrooms either by teaching side-by-side with a coach, or by observing a coach in action with another teacher and collecting insights to take back to their classrooms.

Based on interviews, observations, and document reviews, researchers concluded that Highline “is gaining traction in terms of system-wide instructional improvement in schools and classrooms.” The partnership’s early emphasis on developing instructional leadership for both central office and school leaders has also proved beneficial. Data collected from five research sites between September 2005 and December 2006 reveal school leaders have played an important role in guiding and supporting growth for teachers and coaches.

Research Brief V (October 2007)

Learning at Every Level: Center for Educational Leadership and Marysville School District

(See *Learning at Every Level: A Partnership Between the Center for Educational Leadership and the Marysville School District*, Interim Research Report and Case Study, Swanson, Judy. Sept 2007.)

This publication describes the intersecting opportunities that Marysville leaders and CEL consultants put in place in 2005-06 and 2006-07 to help teachers improve their skills, help principals support teachers as they tried new strategies, and help district leaders model the changes they wanted to see - particularly in terms of content-specific instructional strategies and the leadership necessary to support those strategies.

Conclusion

While early evidence – both research and anecdotal – suggests improvement in teaching and leadership practice as a result of CEL partnerships, this work is not without its challenges. First and foremost is the very nature of the partnership which aims to deepen the organizational capacity in a way that is scalable and sustainable overtime. In essence the partnership is not conceived or advertised as a “short-term fix.” This is problematic in an increasingly punitive federal accountability environment which is geared solely to increased student test scores on single, standardized test measurements. The challenge for district leaders in CEL partnerships is how to build their organizational capacity overtime to change fundamentally teacher and leadership practice while demonstrating short terms test gains.

In addition to the accountability context, the nature of third party interventions to build organizational capacity is a challenge in and of itself. While CEL applies the same three footings to all of its partnerships, there is variation in the degree of centrality, i.e., the extent to which CEL project directors play a central role in terms of influencing the district superintendent’s thinking and actions. CEL plans on commissioning further research studies to understand the factors that lead to this variation, and the effect (if any) on organizational learning.

A final challenge is ensuring that the various CEL consultants/coaches are uniquely qualified to help districts improve their teaching and leadership practice. This is a question of CEL’s own organizational capacity. Because of CEL’s theory of action that calls for both content expertise and leadership expertise to work together in the pedagogy of third party support, it’s critical that CEL “gets it right” in terms of placing its consultants and coaches on-site. It’s worth noting that finding consultants and coaches with the deep level of content and leadership expertise necessary is a huge challenge in and of itself. CEL continues to focus a significant part of its resources on recruitment and development of consultants and coaches to meet this challenge.

With these challenges in mind, the CEL partnership results are highly encouraging. The partnership work has reinforced CEL’s belief that student learning will improve only when teaching practice improves; that teaching practice will improve only when leadership practice improves; and, that it is within our ability to improve both.

Appendix A

CEL PARTNERSHIP THEORY OF ACTION

