

SEPTEMBER 2006

Research Brief I

A Partnership for Improving Instruction

Center for Educational Leadership
and Highline School District

Findings from a one-year case study



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
College of Education

A PARTNERSHIP FOR IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

Educators in Highline School District have one eye on the classroom and another on the calendar — for 2010. Propelled by a commitment to help all students succeed and meet state and federal mandates, the school board approved an ambitious goal in February 2004 that has to be translated into 70 languages for all of the families in the district to understand: 9 out of 10 students will meet standards, graduate on time and be prepared for college or a career by 2010.

This is a challenging goal, even in a district such as Highline, where students have made steady gains academically over the past several years. In 2005, almost 7 in 10 10th graders met the state standard for reading, while not quite 4 in 10 succeeded in meeting the standard in math. It is understandable, then, that district leaders chose to pool district, state and federal Title II professional development dollars to get help in improving instruction. Help took the form of a partnership with the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL), an independently funded organization within the College of Education at the University of Washington.

An examination of the theory of action of the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) and research regarding its work in partnership with school districts is being conducted by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington College of Education. This publication, the first in a series to summarize the research, presents interim findings from a one-year case study and draws from interviews with Chrysan Gallucci, Research Director; Anneke Markholt, CEL Project Director; and Stephen Fink, CEL Executive Director.

In addition to researching the partnership with Highline School District, the researchers also will provide findings in the future from two other CEL partner districts.

This publication summarizes early results of that partnership and includes descriptions of

- n the nature of the partnership,
- n what was being taught,
- n what was being learned, and
- n the impact of the partnership on the district as a system.

The Partners — and the Nature of the Partnership

The Center for Educational Leadership has a challenging mission of its own: to eliminate the achievement gap that divides students along the lines of race, class and language. CEL works to accomplish this mission by providing a variety of services to school districts, schools and individual administrators, including continuing education, technical assistance and partnerships with districts to promote learning across the whole system.

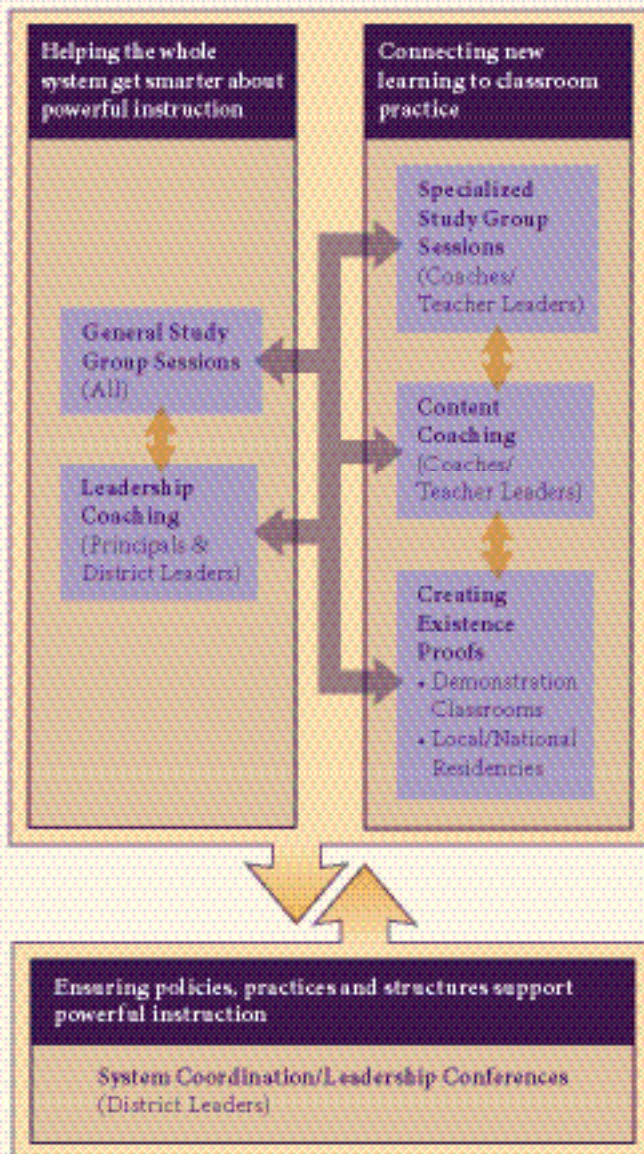
In 2005, Highline was in its second year of a partnership with CEL, but it was also committed to two other major change efforts — systems alignment and high school redesign, both supported by grant funding.

In its partnership with Highline, CEL proposed providing services related to its theory of action:

- n Helping the whole system get smarter about powerful instruction;
- n Connecting new learning to classroom practice; and
- n Ensuring policies, practices and structures support powerful instruction.

Improving Instruction through Content-Focused Leadership

A theory of action, with a focus on pedagogical content and instructional leadership in all phases



To accomplish these actions, CEL brought a set of nonnegotiable components to the table. Primary among them was the importance of leaders learning how to support powerful instruction by being immersed in learning about specific academic content, such as literacy or math. Among the structures used to provide this kind of learning were leadership seminars, an instructional leadership council and coaching. For its part, Highline also introduced a set of givens, among them a commitment to focus improvement on literacy through its reading adoption, a direct-instruction approach that stood in contrast to CEL's support of balanced literacy. CEL collaborated with the district to create a dynamic partnership, rather than deliver a preordained, static menu of services. The researchers concluded that "much of what was accomplished in Highline was a matter of step-by-step negotiation."

The CEL project director for the partnership worked with central office leaders to organize professional development sessions and plan meetings, but she also worked in schools and classrooms on request. Her understanding of what was happening at both the district and school levels informed her efforts to advise leaders and to design strategies that were a good fit for the district. "We tried to be respectful of the arrangements and agreements that the district already had in place," said the CEL project director. "As they made changes in their agreements, we made adaptations in our design for them."

The seven consultants, all of whom were selected for their expertise as well as their fit with district needs, also worked on the ground with leaders at both levels. They spent time in schools, usually accompanied by district instructional leaders, and analyzed professional development needs, planned walkthroughs and demonstration lessons, or worked with classroom teachers. CEL described its consulting strategy as teaching to, teaching with, and then standing by to help the learner as needed.

Researchers observed that the partnership was one that evolved over time, growing in honesty and trust. By the second year of work together, “conversations consisted of increasingly straight talk,” but the relationship was not without tensions. “There was a delicate balance to be achieved between an external partner pushing in to the district with a strong, clear vision of instructional leadership and instruction practice and pulling out in order to support the district’s growth.”

What Was Taught — and How

A bedrock belief of CEL is that the achievement gap will be eliminated only when the quality of instruction in the classroom improves. The quality of instruction will improve at scale when district and school leaders are instructional leaders — educators who know what good teaching looks like and act on that knowledge.

A primary area of CEL instruction at Highline was thus 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. Given the size of this assignment, it is understandable that 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 chose to focus on improving literacy, which meant that learners at all levels — from the district office to building principals to classroom teachers — received explicit teaching to build content knowledge of reading. At the same time, they learned how to teach reading by using these components of powerful instruction:

- n Knowing students well by assessing their prior learning and current learning needs;

- n Supporting students to become independent learners;
- n Delivering rigorous, explicit instruction; and
- n Designing a supportive and appropriate classroom environment.

Consultants worked one-on-one with leaders in the classroom to help them develop an understanding of their role as instructional leader. The responsibility for teaching the concept of instructional leadership was shared over time between consultants and central office leaders. One consultant described the work this way:

My work . . . started off primarily [as] work with a central office person to teach them what an instructional leader is, what they do and how they operate, because they are also the evaluator of principals as well as the coach for principals . . . but now it’s really looking at instruction throughout the building. It’s focused on classrooms. We analyze together, we talk about what is going on with that particular teacher, . . . we then decide what that teacher needs.

Researchers described these visits to classrooms as “opening up” educational practice through intensive scrutiny. Teachers’ classroom practice was the subject of scrutiny by others, but those observing were then expected to scrutinize their own practice as well. Visits could last as long as one day, with observations and debriefs in multiple classrooms. “Opening up practice might be a starting point for instructional improvement,” they noted, “but it required people to voluntarily leave their comfort zones and enter vulnerable, and sometimes humbling, positions.”

Another teaching method — site visits — provided examples of instructional excellence in San Diego and New York. Researchers described the process of learning from others as “observing images of the possible.”

Improving instruction in a variety of settings

Activity	Participants	Content	Frequency
Leadership Seminars (All Day)	District leaders District coaches Principals School-level coaches CEL consultants CEL project director	Literacy: How to teach reading and the implications for leadership	Monthly
Instructional Leadership Council	Representative membership: Superintendent Central office instructional leaders Highline Educational Association Principals CEL project director	Strategic thinking about policies, practices and structures Debriefing existing work	Monthly
Leadership Coaching and Classroom Observations	District instructional leaders Principals School-level coaches Consultants CEL project director	Modeling specific strategies, observing teaching and debriefing what was observed	4 days/year per principal 44 days per district instructional leader (in conjunction with principal coaching*)
External Site Visits	District leaders School staff members CEL project director	Observing teaching in other locales	3–5 days San Diego, New York
Coaching	Ninth grade literacy teachers, Clover Valley High School CEL consultants CEL project director	Teaching content for students as well as their teachers	25 days

*Approximate. Each district leader had about 11 schools to supervise and spent four days in each school.

By showing examples of exceptional practice and demonstrating good teaching with Highline students in Highline classrooms, CEL deliberately set up the experience of dissonance — creating the contrast between existing practice and what leaders can see works better.

What Highline Learned

Highline leaders learned to change their views of their own roles as leaders and, consequently, change how they use their time. District leaders who supervised principals were at each school building for two hours approximately every other week, working with principals and supporting their professional development. Their understanding of what constitutes professional development changed as well. Instead of a “sweep of the building,” ducking into each classroom for a few minutes, district leaders and principals learned to observe demonstration lessons and debrief what they saw.

We would do planning together, then a teacher would try on the lesson and we'd come back and debrief; then we'd try it on again. So [it worked] a lot like a lesson study. And our teachers were walking away excited and enthused. And our principals, I think, got more understanding about good instruction than they did through walking through their classrooms.

The commitment to being in classrooms more often also applies to principals, who now spend a minimum of two hours per day in classrooms to understand the professional development needs of their teachers and how to make improvements. Their role has changed from being responsible for a well-managed school to being responsible for student achievement and instructional improvement. As one central office leader explained, “Before, we hired principals because of their managerial skills and personnel skills, but not necessarily because they were instructional leaders.”

Principals, building coaches and teachers all learned in greater depth how to teach reading and how to apply both their content knowledge and pedagogy in observation, classroom coaching and lesson planning.

Principals learned to use their newfound knowledge of reading strategies to shape conversations with teachers.

I've learned to strategically ask questions that are going to get at the instructional purpose and how to close a read-aloud . . .

I can provide specific, meaningful and timely feedback to teachers in a way unlike I've ever been able to do before.

And so I really learned that day that I should only be scripting the questions — or focusing in on the questions and student responses so I can have a very focused conversation with the teacher . . . [I]t was really profound to think about how I could get more out of my time.

An external consultant noted how building coaches learned to use coaching cycles as a result of the combination of observation, coaching practice and direct feedback. “They absolutely did not know how to do [coaching cycles] a year ago,” the consultant said.

Consultants also observed a change in how teachers presented lessons in the classroom and gathered evidence that the teachers were adopting practices they had seen demonstrated, either by the consultants or in other district classrooms.

They'd actually gone to another school to see (another coach) teach a sixth-grade class doing a Read-Aloud, and they came back, did some planning, and a couple of upper-grade teachers really took off. And the change today was pretty amazing.

“We have learned that the less you know, the more simple things seem, and the more you know, the more complex things are. I want you to think back to how many of us thought implementing independent reading would be easy because we related it to sustained silent reading. I was one of them. We all know better now. Shared reading is more than just slapping something on the overhead. Last year it was our best thinking at the time.”

— ELEMENTARY DIRECTOR

Center for Educational Leadership

A teacher commented on the change in her practice:

I'm getting to know more about third graders — where they are developmentally and what they need to know. I used to focus on just really easy questions, and I'm now trying to get them ... to think harder.

One aspect of instructional leadership that Highline learned was the development of “leadership voice” — the ability of individuals to articulate for their colleagues what they see as good instruction and the basis for their judgments. This voice is expressed verbally at staff meetings and professional development sessions and in writing through letters, memos and bulletins. The assumption here is that it's one thing to be able to evaluate teacher practice and another to improve the quality of instruction by drawing clear distinctions between what is good instruction and what isn't.

There were changes in structures and processes in Highline that are indications of system learning, among them:

- n Rather than allocate resources equally to all schools and teachers, Highline provided “differentiated” resources and support to “goer” teachers and schools — those “willing to embrace change and new learning.”
- n The district reassigned responsibility for principal supervision and evaluation. The workload for elementary schools was divided between two directors, and the four middle schools were assigned to the secondary director. In the past, one central office administrator had responsibility for 21 elementary schools and 4 middle schools.
- n Highline developed a new evaluation tool for principals that included a focus on their role as instructional leaders, and it changed the job description of literacy coaches to require them to be in the classroom 50 percent of the time.

The Ongoing Research Agenda

Based on their observations in the pilot study, researchers concluded that the CEL partnership has had a “significant impact in the district.” The research agenda for the 2005–06 year, and for examination of CEL partnerships in other districts, included these questions that will be addressed in future publications:

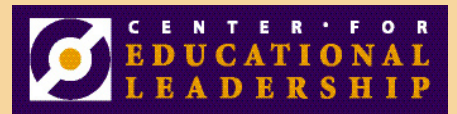
- n How does the participation of district personnel in roles and activities related to instructional-improvement practice change over time?
- n What are the critical characteristics and dimensions of the settings that support learning for district personnel, and how are they constructed?
- n How do interactions with an external provider shape or guide the district in teaching and learning related to instructional improvement practice?
- n In what ways do individual and collective learning among district personnel contribute to what the district as a system learns?

The Pedagogy of Third-Party Support for Instructional Improvement: A Partnership between CEL and Highline School District can be found at www.depts.washington.edu/uwcel/resources/research.html.

Authors: Chrysan Gallucci, Beth Boatright, Dan Lysne and Juli Swinnerton

9709 3rd Avenue NE
Suite 306
Seattle, WA 98115
Campus Mailbox: #358731

P: 206.221.6881
F: 206.221.6774
edlead@u.washington.edu
www.k-12leadership.org



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
College of Education