

## **“Leadership Across the District: Outside the Principal’s Office and Beyond the School Walls”**

When the Saint Paul School Board selected Dr. Pat Harvey 1999 as its new Superintendent, they gained access to her 30 years of experience. “They were looking for a leader to do the work I was ready to lead,” she recalls. Part of that experience had come in Chicago, where she had seen first-hand the potential of moving power and authority away from the central administration and to the individual schools. She also understood that to capitalize fully on that shift of power and authority, a District needed to have strong leaders in place in the school buildings. Giving greater authority to school Principals and encouraging them to operate in partnership with Site Councils (consisting of teachers, parents, and even students) would require strong leadership at the building level.

That raised several significant questions. First, just what did the District mean when it said it needed effective leadership – what does *leadership* mean in the context of giving greater autonomy to the schools? Second, what did the District propose to do to create and support that stronger leadership? Third, is it enough just to have strong leadership within the school buildings in the position of the Principal?

The District answered the first question with the development of its competency-based Leadership Model. The Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi Foundation provided critical initial and ongoing support, serving as the

catalyst for collaborative efforts between senior staff members from the District and external consultant Bob Eichinger. Separate from and complementary to *instructional* leadership, the District has created its own model of *positional* leadership. It based this model on the Leadership Architect® competencies drawn from the work of Eichinger’s firm, Lominger Limited, Inc. Thus the District tackled one fundamental problem. Even though the problem was highlighted as far back as 1987<sup>1</sup>, it remains an issue.

{Figure 1 below (the model) goes about here}

The District answered the second question with the development of its annual Leadership Institute. Offered each year since 2000, the Institute consists of three intensive weeks during the summer with monthly follow-up sessions for a full year to prepare aspiring principals to serve in urban schools. Supt. Harvey points out, “The skillset that you need outside a metro area or even in a suburban school is different from the skillset you need to lead here”. Both of these initial efforts had strong connections to the evolution toward site-based improvements. Andy Xiong, Assistant Principal at Battle Creek Environmental Magnet Elementary School, adds, “SPPS is pretty unique in growing its own administrators – shaping them and molding them into leadership

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<sup>1</sup> See *Leaders for America’s Schools* (Griffiths et al. 1988). Apparently the problem remains today -- see (*UCEA Establishes National Commission For the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation Proposes "Collaborative Effort"* 2002) for their announcement of “the

positions, and doing a good job of making sure that they look at people's skills. They see potential and provide support and affirmation."

With those key elements in place, the District then turned to the third question: What about leadership beyond the principal's position and even beyond the walls of the school buildings themselves? That led to an examination of a series of related questions: Don't we also need strong leadership in other less visible but essential areas? Don't we need our Human Resources staff to recruit and retain the best people possible? Don't we need our Support Services staff to provide the most effective transportation and nutrition services they can? Don't we need growing and developing leaders from across the various functions and even across the hierarchy? "For anyone to grow and develop professionally, you need to be more reflective and I think that's where the District is moving. We need to not be complacent," Asst. Principal Xiong continues.

In response to these questions, Supt. Harvey has re-drawn the organizational structure creating the *Office of Leadership Development and Site Based Improvement*. "The expansion beyond the Leadership Institute was a deliberate plan. First to take the idea across the District then to take it deep as opposed to starting out with small pilots that never get the chance to be systemic. Leadership is extremely important at all levels, and I would include teachers, as well," she contends. "If we are going to do the very best for our children, we have to bring out the

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development of a national commission focused on leadership preparation" to "develop broad

best thoughts from the widest range of people.” The school system is in fact a *whole system*; the District cannot afford to concentrate its efforts in just one part of that system.

Dennis St. Sauver (Executive Director) and Kate Wilcox-Harris (Associate Director) invested much of the period from May 2003 through June 2004 developing and implementing a variety of new services to support the deployment of ‘leadership across the District.’ With the Leadership Model firmly in place defining the standard of comparison, they have sought to offer a variety of services – at the individual competency level and at the competency cluster level. Recognizing that most of the District’s work is done by rank-and-file members of the workforce, they have opened up many of their offerings to the entire family of Saint Paul Public Schools employees. Theresa Battle, now in her third year as Principal at Highland Park Junior High School, commented about expanding the target audience: “I think it’s a very unique opportunity and initiative in St Paul, I think because it focuses on leadership throughout the organization. We have professional development for teachers and principals, and now they’ve extended that to central office personnel. It’s about raising the level of leadership at every level throughout the district.”

Beginning in late 2003, the Office of Leadership Development began offering a 360°-feedback service to people in leadership positions.

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consensus on effective leadership given current and changing needs of today's schools.”

At this point, nearly sixty people have taken advantage of this service. With a clear focus on personal leadership development, it provides a framework for *learners* to receive candid feedback on their level of demonstrated *skill* on a variety of competencies. The feedback comes from the *learner*, the *boss*, and a mixture of *peers*, *direct reports*, and *customers*<sup>2</sup>. In addition, each rater offers feedback on the relative *importance* of those competencies to the learner's job. "The beauty of what we've created in St Paul is that everyone is invested in the success of everyone else," Supt. Harvey notes. Deb Henton, in her fourth year as Principal at Harding High School, supports this claim. "I know of one Asst. Principal who wants to get into the Institute and has interviewed and failed," she explains. "That individual did not ask for any advice or support before going into the interviews, and it was difficult because I was one of the interviewers. Knowing that the individual hadn't asked for any help, and seeing the failure was pretty tough, but it led to a really candid conversation between the two of us."

This 360°-feedback comes to the learner in the form of a comprehensive (and potentially overwhelming) report - thus the Office has arranged for experienced interpreters to help guide the learner through the data. Based on the triangular combination of (1) where an individual lacks strength, (2) what the individual's job requires, and (3)

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<sup>2</sup> The names designating these roles comes directly from Lominger's 360-Degree Feedback Tool.

the context offered by the Leadership Model, each individual can create an individualized leadership development plan with the help of the Office.

The Office offers three varieties of support (in addition to the Leadership Institute) to foster the actual development of skills and knowledge. The first service offers Mentors for people in their first three years as a school principal. The District makes the remaining two services, however, broadly available across the District.

The second service offers Competency Coaches for those whose seek to strengthen a specific competency from within the Leadership Model (e.g., *Timely Decision Making*). These coaching opportunities bring together, largely on a volunteer basis, those with recognized proficiency and those seeking improvement. The District uses this approach to address two supportive goals. Firstly, it wants to increase the internal leadership capacity through both the delivery and receipt of the coaching. Secondly, it wants to develop a stronger internal network of interpersonal relationship.

The third service offers a series of courses collectively called the Core Curriculum. Within this curriculum each course focuses on a broader Competency Cluster (e.g., *Managing Staff*) from the Leadership Model. Note that virtually all District employees have access to both the Competency Coaches and the Core Curriculum. This availability applies regardless of whether the individual has a ten-month contract or a twelve-month contract, regardless of whether the individual works in a school

building or in the central administration offices, and regardless of the individual's place in the organizational hierarchy. At the end of each course the participants offer their evaluations. Comments such as "The Core Curriculum is an awesome gift to Saint Paul Public Schools employees!" and "This is the most valuable course that I have taken. It offers important skills and tools all employees and supervisors need to have" appear often. Principal Deb Henton echoes those sentiments: "I've found that the professional development opportunities here in this District are unlike any for other Districts I've been in. There are just so many opportunities that I never had when I was in other districts."

Supt. Harvey also understands that the senior staff members in the District have a special role to play. They make a unique contribution to the success of the schools, even though they may not have daily interaction with the students in those schools. Supt. Harvey arranged for herself and the top staff members to engage in their own ongoing leadership development. Working with 3M Company, she brought the top District administrators together for a two-day retreat facilitated by 3M staff and held at 3M Center in November of 2003. "A core best practice is the widest engagement of the public in its schools, allowing the business to give us the best they can," notes Supt. Harvey. "It's not just about asking for money – it's about achieving alignment, about listening, about agreeing ahead of time what the work *is* then making it happen. We are all intricately connected [to public education] – we pay for it

through our taxes, we depend on it in terms of our future ... and these are our babies. For those reasons it's important for us to agree as to what we're doing and where we're headed." Based on what was gleaned from that retreat, she asked the Office of Leadership Development to devise and subsequently deliver two half-day workshops and one full-day workshop during the spring and summer of 2004.

The complexity and turbulence of contemporary public education require that each person within the system be prepared to offer strong leadership, moment to moment and situation to situation. Researchers have provided solid evidence to support the assertion that more effective leadership in schools leads to higher levels of student achievement. In addition, common sense that tells us that effective *schools* cannot thrive in isolation from the rest of the school *system*. Organizations cannot rely on effective leadership in just one specific part of the system; consequently they cannot restrict their leadership development efforts to narrow groups. The Saint Paul School System has taken these beliefs into action.

By creating an integrated suite of leadership offerings and by making it broadly available across to staff members across the district, Saint Paul Public Schools has shown what a district can do. Supt. Harvey points out that as Superintendent she holds ultimate accountability for the performance of the District. "My job is to provide leadership and be held accountable mainly by the school board but by the wider community

as well. We each see the world differently. In order for us to do our best, we cannot own it – it has to be shared ownership ... [the school system] belongs to everybody. If we do that well, then we will be in sync in terms of what we're educating kids toward. It's preparation for life in our community." Her ultimate goal, however, does not focus on *her* success but rather on that of the *District*. "I've given this a lot of thought. Personally, what I'd like for my career is a restoring of respect for urban education. I want to be able to look back when I'm in my senior years and say that the people of Saint Paul have high respect for their schools."

## References

Eichinger, Robert W., and Michael M. Lombardo. 2001. *The Leadership Machine*. Minneapolis: Lominger Ltd.

Griffiths, Daniel Edward, Robert T. Stout, Patrick B. Forsyth, and Daniel E. Griffiths. 1988. *Leaders for America's Schools: The Report and Papers of the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration*: McCutchan Pub Corp.

*UCEA Establishes National Commission For the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation Proposes "Collaborative Effort"*  
[Press Release] 2002 [cited 13 Aug 2004. Available from  
<http://www.ncaelp.org/PressRelease.htm>.

Figure 1 – The Saint Paul Public Schools Leadership Model<sup>3</sup>

## **Character / Role Model**

- Ethics and Values (22)
- Integrity and Trust (29)
- Composure (11)

## **Working Constructively with Others**

- Informing (27)
- Presentation Skills (49)
- Interpersonal Savvy (31)
- Conflict Management (12)

## **Managing Staff**

- Directing Others (20)
- Delegation (18)
- Building Effective Teams (60)
- Motivating Others (36)

## **Resourcefulness / Getting Things Done with Less**

- Organizing (39)
- Planning (47)
- Priority Setting (50)

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<sup>3</sup> The competencies included in the model are from the Leadership Architect® Copyright © 1992, 1996, 2001-2003 Lominger Limited, Inc., and used by permission.

- Time Management (62)

## **Getting Results**

- Action Oriented (1)
- Timely Decision Making (16)
- Problem Solving (51)
- Drive for Results (53)

## **Creating and Leading the Vision**

- Managing Vision and Purpose (65)
- Strategic Agility (58)
- Dealing with Ambiguity (2)
- Learning on the Fly (32)

## **Managing Constituencies Effectively**

- Customer Focus (15)
- Political Savvy (48)
- Negotiating (37)
- Managing Diversity (21)
- Organizational Agility (38)