

OD at the SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by Michael Ayers, The Commonwealth Practice, Ltd.

Background

Research clearly shows the link between the caliber of school leadership and improved student outcomes. We have evidence, for example, that schools with an environment featuring a high degree of interpersonal trust have higher student achievement scores. In addition, common sense tells us that an effective organization must have a clear sense of what it wants to accomplish and how it proposes to measure progress.

The comprehensive school reform model adopted by the SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS and Superintendent Pat Harvey recognizes that effective *instructional* leadership sits at the heart of institutional change. The model reflects the District's deep commitment to systemic professional development in order to improve achievement for all students.

History

In 2000, SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS created a Leadership Model to form the basis of its leadership development efforts. The model includes seven clusters:

- Character / Role Model,
- Working Constructively with Others,
- Managing Staff,
- Resourcefulness / Getting Things Done with Less,
- Getting Results,
- Creating and Leading the Vision, and
- Managing Constituencies Effectively.

The clusters include 28 individual competencies (e.g., Timely Decision Making). Dennis St. Sauver and Kate Wilcox-Harris recently took on the roles of Executive Director and Associate Director of the District's Office of Leadership Development. Dennis commented, "I am very comfortable and extremely satisfied with our Leadership Model. I think it is concise, practical, realistic, and based on a high set of standards." Dennis and Kate began 2003 with the intention of expanding their services beyond the annual

Leadership Institute – an intensive three-week learning experience during the summer followed by monthly half-day sessions, targeted at aspiring principals.

Clearly leadership within the schools plays an important role. Leadership in areas *beyond the walls* of the schools has a less direct but nonetheless significant impact on the District's ability to achieve its mission. The effectiveness of various staff groups (e.g., HR with regard to hiring and staffing or Purchasing with regard to acquisition of supplies) also has an indirect impact on student achievement. Dennis noted, "I was looking for someone who could help us think about big picture of leadership development for the district. We had some ideas on what we would like to see, but needed help to frame the entire concept of leadership and then get specifics for the different groups."

Phase 1

Dennis and Kate asked my consulting company, The Commonwealth Practice, Ltd. (TCWP), to assist and guide them. My partner, Mike Marois, and I spent May and June helping them to establish a clear direction. During that period, TCWP interviewed about a dozen critical internal stakeholders to determine what they believed the Office could offer. Building on that input, TCWP helped the Office establish a mission for its work, along with four primary supporting goals. That mission and those goals have guided the activities of the Office since then.

SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS
OFFICE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Mission

“To achieve superior positional leadership resulting in superior student achievement”

Primary Goals

In its effort to realize its mission the Office of Leadership Development will ...

- Offer *High Quality Learning Opportunities* designed to foster the development of positional leadership skills and behaviors for Saint Paul Public Schools’ personnel
- Integrate the *Positional Leadership Competency Clusters* broadly into all services
- Support the positional leadership activity of *People in Various Roles*
- Clarify *Organizational Expectations* for positional leadership

Dennis and Kate also believed that the Office needed an picture both to convey this integrated set of goals and to unify visually the various publications from the Office. We finally settled on the metaphor of a suspension bridge. Even though people using the bridge see only the road surface (equated to ‘high quality learning opportunities’) we all agreed that the quality and durability of the road depended on the infrastructure.

Phase 2

During July and August, we identified a suite of services called simply the Catalog of Offerings. It included the original offering: the Leadership Institute and its associated mentoring program for newer school principals. It also included three critical new components:

- a *Core Curriculum* based deliberately on the Leadership Model,
- a *360°-feedback and individual leadership development program*, highlighting the competencies in the Leadership Model, and
- *Competency Coaching* as a targeted response to specific competencies.

To develop the Core Curriculum, we constructed multi-session courses with each course focused on one of the seven clusters identified above. To develop the Competency

Coaching, by contrast, we helped them identify and prepare coaches to work one-on-one on a specific competency on a time-limited basis.

With a destination now in mind and a roadway under construction, we shifted our focus to measurements. While Competency Coaching has a short-term tactical focus, the Institute and Core Curriculum have a longer-term strategic focus. The Office adopted a thoughtful approach to metrics. It wants to know whether, by virtue of their involvement, the participants have become more effective as leaders. Do the individuals who participate in the Institute, for instance, show a change in their behavior which we reasonably expect to lead to increased organizational effectiveness?

Thus, the Office evaluates various offerings in its Catalog at appropriate levels using the Kirkpatrick taxonomy. In a few cases, it uses Kirkpatrick Levels 1 or 2. In other cases the Office sees a real need to evaluate the offering at Level 3. These metrics provide ongoing feedback for continuous improvement helping the Office achieve its mission.

Phase 3

During October through December, the focus shifted from planning to delivering. Recognizing that leadership can occur from countless places within the school district, the Office opened its Catalog of Offerings to all SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS employees. In October the Office offered a coaching workshop to those people who had volunteered to serve as Competency Coaches. Also in October, it offered the first course from the Core Curriculum, receiving very positive reviews. In fact, the size of the waiting lists prompted the Office to double the original number of sessions scheduled for the year. The Office also launched its 360°-feedback process in late October, selecting a group of seventeen people from the scores who expressed interest in participating. After receiving their direct and specific feedback, the participants now had concrete options within the Catalog to continue their leadership development.



Kate notes that “the work we are doing is really unlike anything I was ever offered as a new leader – time to reflect on my leadership skills and the behaviors I engage in ... these are truly new opportunities.”

Results

As the Office moves ahead this year, it will continue to capture feedback from the participants. It will use that feedback to adjust the content and focus of its work. Dennis and Kate view the preliminary results as very encouraging. Superintendent Pat Harvey has challenged the District to incorporate the practices of ‘knowing with precision’ and ‘data-driven decisions’ into its DNA. The Office of Leadership Development has accepted that challenge and moved ahead aggressively.



Dennis sums it all up by saying, “Can you imagine 300-500 leaders who are highly skilled in our competencies and their potential impact on our kids in schools? It is AWESOME!!!”

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