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S P R I N G

C E N T E R F O R P U B L I C L E A D E R S H I P

# WORKING PAPERS

HARVARD  
UNIVERSITY



JOHN F. KENNEDY  
SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

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## **SUPPORTING SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS**

**THE STATE OF EXECUTIVE TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR  
SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

**“The current working paper explores what is available to superintendents after they assume their positions: what the landscape of sustained executive training and support options available for sitting school system leaders looks like.”**

The leadership challenges faced by school superintendents are well documented, along with the critical nature of their leadership to sustaining school and school district improvement. (McCabe-Cabron, et al., 2005; Williams, 2004; Thomas, 2001; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Peterson, 1999). Also documented are the university-based programs that prepare individuals to be school superintendents (Levine, 2005; McCarthy 1999; National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration, 1988). The current working paper explores what is available to superintendents after they assume their positions: what the landscape of sustained executive training and support options available for sitting school system leaders looks like. It describes about two dozen programs offered around the country—who offers them, how they are organized and funded, what (if any) theoretical approaches undergird them, and what (if any) evaluations are done on their impacts. The report describes programs offered by superintendent membership organizations, other (non-superintendent) non-profits, universities, foundations and for-profit companies.

The study was funded by the Wallace Foundation, as part of its support for an executive program for urban superintendents offered by the Kennedy School of Government and the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. The full report, including the individual programmatic descriptions and the summary responses to the guiding questions of the study, is available on the Wallace Foundation’s website.

This working paper briefly describes the methodology and the programs surveyed, and then looks at some of the broader questions about the nature of the executive programs available, exploring common attributes across programs, as well as design choices programs make about format, funding, focus, theories of action, and coaching. The paper concludes by stepping back to look at these programs as part of a system—what our country offers for the executive education and support of sitting school superintendents. It examines funding and scaling-up issues, capacity building at the districts and at the sponsoring organizations, and what assessments can be made of the impact of these programs.

## PART 1: SAMPLING METHODOLOGY AND INCLUDED PROGRAMS

The research, conducted between June and September 2004 used a “snowball” referral technique, starting with 12 urban superintendents in the Superintendent Leadership Program under way at Harvard and funded by the Wallace Foundation. The superintendents were asked to identify other long-term executive training programs that provided more than one-shot workshops and were sustained for a year or more. They generated a list of about a dozen programs and organizations, which were researched on the web and through follow-up interviews. Each interview ended with a request for leads on other programs that existed for sustained work with sitting superintendents. This process generated another dozen or so leads that were followed up in similar fashion. These referrals drew on a range of potential providers and organizers of such training—superintendent associations, other non-profits, universities, foundations, and for-profit companies. These programs had to be for sitting superintendents; programs to prepare individuals to become superintendents were excluded. In addition, to be considered “long-term” or “sustained,” programs had to be more than “one-shot” conferences or workshops and had to aim to bring

together a consistent group of superintendents at least several times, for at least a year. Note that this research survey is largely based on self-report data and materials published by the organization, except in rare occasions, noted in the paper, when third party evaluations were completed and available.

## Questions

Respondents for each program were asked:

- 1 How is your program organized, delivered, and funded (e.g., how long has it been in operation? How many times does it meet? For how many superintendents?)
- 2 Where is its intellectual and practical focus? How would you summarize its central approach or key theory of change?
- 3 How does the executive training you offer move into the district: how is it linked to district, school, and classroom improvement?
- 4 How are you evaluating the impact of your executive program?

## Data Sources/Evidence

The snowball sampling technique described above has led to a wide-ranging set of data sources, which, while it is not exhaustive or inclusive of every program for sitting superintendents in the country, is certainly representative of the range of programs available. These are summarized below, organized by sponsoring sector.

Not surprisingly, superintendent membership organizations like the American Association of School Administrators and its state affiliates are important providers. For example, the New Superintendent Academy (New Jersey Association of School Administrators) offers six one-day seminars over the year, planned around issues pertaining to the first year superintendents' experience. Project Leadership (Washington Association of School Administrators) offers a statewide in-service cohort program with a four-year cycle of learning for superintendents, organized as part of its state biannual conferences. The Western States Benchmarking Consortium is an unusual group of superintendents formed specifically for the professional development and focused learning of its member districts, with a particular focus on searching for ways to use and implement greater and more meaningful accountability in their districts.

Other non-profits that do not exclusively serve superintendents offer programs that draw them in for sustained training and support. For example, the Aspen Institute which has a broader global mission around leadership, dialogue and inquiry, has set up the Urban Superintendents Network to bring together non-traditional superintendents (coming from the corporate world or other sectors), seasoned superintendents who have come through more traditional educational systems, and some outside resources—retired superintendents, researchers, or corporate thinkers. As part of its larger efforts to promote school change at a deep level, the Connecticut Center for School Change, a small not-for-profit based in Hartford, offers a Superintendents' Network for a dozen superintendents who developed a practice of conducting “walk-throughs” in each others' districts as part of an overall strategy of large-scale instructional improvement. WestEd is a federally funded regional education lab whose staff helps to facilitate the Executive Leadership Center for California Superintendents, originally a grant-funded collaboration with the California Department of Education, but more recently funded by the superintendents as part of their state association dues. The Council of Great City Schools also offers programs specific to superintendents as part of a larger educational and urban-focused agenda. Some non-profits like the Center for Creative Leadership customize existing leadership programs for superintendents; and others, like the Institute for Educational Leadership, offer programs that mix superintendents in with other school and community leaders.

Most university-based programs for superintendents are preparatory in nature (and fall outside the scope of this paper). Many of those that serve existing superintendents, as expected, are based in the education schools of these universities, like the New Superintendent Seminar Series at Teachers College, Columbia University, with a focus on year-long collaborative inquiry on leadership. Several other initiatives are broader collaborations that draw on other elements of the university, like the School Study Councils at the University of Pennsylvania, where for the last 40 years, area superintendents have had extraordinary access to the full range of Penn professors. The University of Pittsburgh has a program that is unusual in its close programmatic and intellectual ties to the regional foundation-supported Western Pennsylvania School Superintendent Forum. Similarly, Harvard’s Change Leadership Group, based at the Graduate School of Education, has significant support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and has parallel approaches and close intellectual ties with a Gates-sponsored district change network in Washington State. Other programs—especially those set up more recently—represent some form of collaboration between education schools and other professional schools, like Harvard’s Wallace-funded collaboration between the Kennedy and Education Schools, or Harvard’s Public Education Leadership Program and Stanford’s Executive Program for Educational Leaders, both Education/Business School collaborations.

Several foundations have taken on the mission of sustaining and supporting superintendent development, sometimes locally, like the Gates Foundation, which works with 10 districts and a diocese in Washington State, or BellSouth, working in 11 states in the southeast. In some cases, foundations like Danforth have made major commitments, supporting a national initiative that engaged more than hundreds of superintendents over a decade and led to several regional offshoots, including the Western Pennsylvania School Superintendent Forum.

A few for-profit companies provide what might be considered sustained training and/or networking support for superintendents through their activities. The Educational Research Development Institute brings together groups of superintendents semi-annually to solicit their input into refining corporate products and services, creating focused networking and discussion opportunities for them. The District Management Council provides sophisticated management consulting reports to contracting districts and, as part of its business model, brings superintendents together periodically to discuss the reports and their implications, in what amounts to sustained training and networking support.

## **PART 2: CROSS-CUTTING THEMES: COMMON ATTRIBUTES, DESIGN CHOICES AND LINGERING QUESTIONS**

Asking four basic questions of about two-dozen programs has yielded a rich data set about the state of executive education programs for sitting superintendents in this country. The data can be crosscut on many different dimensions—types of program structures, funding formats, long-term sustainability, theories in action, evaluation approaches, and so on.

What follows is a look at three broad areas: first, what I see as some common attributes of these programs for sitting superintendents. Next, I look at choice points within them—the reflecting tradeoffs that programs make in sorting their priorities, and adding up to a preliminary set of program design considerations. I conclude this section with design questions these programs still appear to be figuring out how to address.

## Section 1: Common Attributes

Overall I have been impressed by how so many superintendents, busy as they are, are willing to take two to three days several times a year to participate in some sort of executive learning experience—that they even seem to “hunger” for it, in the words of some of the interviewees. The programs that appeared to have strong appeal for superintendents seem to have had most, or all, of the following common features.

- A “safe space”: an environment where superintendents could come and talk honestly about real issues that they face—to discuss their challenges and their learning, without feeling constrained in talking openly or doing anything that they might see as compromising their authority.
- Peers and fellow participants: colleagues they feel they can respect and build relationships with—with whom and from whom they can learn. Primarily, of course, these have been fellow superintendents. But in some programs, participants have included non-superintendents as well—sometimes others from their districts, or outsiders altogether (business executives, academics, former superintendents).
- Personal learning about one’s own leadership: Sometimes an explicit and primary focus, as in programs sponsored by the Center for Creative Leadership; many times it is a more implicit portion of the program.
- Practical and useful ideas that connect to their work in their districts: a key element, whether the focus is on immediate technical skills or long-term adaptive growth, in connecting to, and having an impact on, the school district of the superintendent.

## Section 2: Choice Points

In trying to achieve each of these attributes, superintendent executive programs make different choices about what is important, leading to a number of trade-offs that distinguish the programs and their priorities from each other. The choice points fall into three broad categories, with the middle category filled with the most choices:

Who participates in the program?

What do they learn and how do they work together?

How does the work done in the program connect to the district?

Each of these categories is elaborated below.

### Who Participates in the Program?

The first and most basic design question concerns composition. Who, if anyone else, should be included, besides superintendents?

Many of the programs described here—those of the superintendent associations, as well as others, like the Connecticut Center for School Change, WestEd, Aspen, Columbia, and the Harvard Superintendent Leadership Program are for superintendents, and only superintendents. They are creating what Jane Tedder, director of the Connecticut program, calls the “rare opportunity” for a protected space for superintendents to be open with each other. These programs make a clear choice to provide a space for superintendents to support one another and learn from one another. Each of these also has some non-superintendent participants as well—as organizers, faculty, or facilitators—to provide input or stimulate discussion, but their primary client is the superintendent. (For more on how superintendents and non-superintendents work together in these settings, see the next major heading.)

Some programs deliberately mix superintendents with leaders from other areas. The Center for Creative Leadership has a “Leadership at the Peak” program that brings together selected superintendents with corporate CEOs, college presidents, and world political leaders, arguing that the benefits are enormous, especially for superintendents of large districts. The Educational Policy Fellows Program of the Institute for Educational Leadership mixes superintendents with legislators, college presidents, non-profit and community leaders. Organizers of those programs would argue that the advantages of learning together outweigh the losses of the safe space.

Some programs deliberately include other individuals from the superintendent’s own district—members of leadership teams as well as other stakeholders—principals, teachers, union leaders, board members, or community members. These programs, which include the Gates Foundation Washington State program, Harvard’s Public Education Leadership Program and its Change Leadership Group, and Stanford’s Executive Program for Educational Leaders, also have chosen to give lower priority to the creation of a safe space. By bringing more of the stakeholders in, these programs give priority to being able to trigger deeper systemic change at the district level through engagement of a variety of stakeholders, with the possibilities of contributing to a stronger local change support community. In these settings, learning for the superintendents is, by design, woven into his or her district context.

The question about the “superintendent-only” limitation is not a clear either/or choice in some programs. Several, like Penn’s Study Councils invite superintendents to bring a guest for a particular session. Others, like the Washington Gates program use a hybrid approach, with much of the focus on district leadership team meetings, but with some regular, separate breakout times for superintendents only. The Western Benchmarking group, while clearly set up and focused for superintendents, makes strategic invitations to other district personnel, depending on the issue and focus. Harvard’s Bob Schwartz, who helped set up the Public Education Leadership Program (which brings together large district teams, including the superintendent) and also serves as an advisor to the Aspen Institute (limited to superintendent only), notes that the superintendents of five of the nine school districts involved in PELP are involved in the Aspen Institute, thus giving them the benefits through two separate programs of both approaches.

### **What Do They Learn and How Do They Work Together?**

Three important interrelated issues emerge under this broad heading. What is the content or focus of the learning? Who decides the focus, and what is the balance in shaping this decision between superintendent participants, on the one hand, and the program planners and other non-superintendent facilitators, experts, and other participants, on the other? Finally, how and when do these programs develop into real learning communities for the superintendents?

#### *Content and Focus*

A stereotyped expectation of what superintendents and non-superintendent planners or facilitators would want as content in an executive workshop assumes that superintendents would opt for “nuts and bolts” sessions, “ideas they can use immediately,” and that others would focus more on the “big picture,” change theory, and long-range planning. To a limited extent these expectations play out among the programs surveyed here, with the state superintendent association programs in Washington and New Jersey most clearly tied to immediate factual knowledge (for example, “What you need to know about No Child Left Behind;” “What can you do tomorrow to help raise test scores”), as opposed to the programs at Columbia (inquiry and reflection), Stanford (redesigning complex systems, curricular and instructional design), and Harvard’s Superintendent Leadership Program (adaptive leadership, distinguishing between

technical and adaptive change). The non-profits and foundations involved could be seen as falling somewhere in between: being clearly driven and responsive to expressed superintendent needs and varying on the level of theoretical approach (no pre-set theory, just the powerful mix of people at Aspen Institute; a strong focus, which was not pre-imposed but evolved on superintendent walkthroughs in Connecticut ).

But these distinctions serve only as a starting point. New Jersey Superintendent Association's director Hank Cram looks forward to collaborating with superintendents on a planning team to develop programming that "does not just look at putting out fires," but helps superintendents and principals work collaboratively and focus more on "systems thinking." The director of the Washington State association's program, Neal Powell, while noting that participants like workshops that are "focusing on the practical ... things they can use" has designed a program that delivers those workshops imbedded in a four-year cycle that includes personal growth and systems thinking. And Harvard's Superintendent Leadership Program, while framed around Ronald A. Heifetz' adaptive leadership model, has sessions that tightly focus on immediate superintendent needs. For example, last year the superintendents each brought a short case that included a difficult leadership conversation they needed to have in their district. Most of the two-day session focused on video-taped roleplaying, peer feedback, and repeated practice for the interaction, which each superintendent vowed to have within a week or her or his return. Another superintendent-formed, and superintendent-led organization, the Western States Benchmarking Consortium, balances immediate needs with a far-ranging focus on developing and refining quality improvement systems in their districts. The for-profit District Management Council focuses on supplying information that superintendents can use immediately, but at a highly sophisticated level, drawing on a range of management consulting input.

#### *Balancing Superintendent and Non-Superintendent Input*

Most of the organizers and planners of these programs are not (and most never were) superintendents, and virtually all of them stress the importance of following the lead of the superintendents in selecting topics, and designing shared experiences. Negotiating that balance has been an important factor in shaping these programs: how the non-superintendents add value by appropriately drawing on their outsider status, their other experiences, and their access to other ideas and information. For example, Penn's Study Councils Director, Harris Sokoloff (who talks about how, as non-superintendent, he had to establish his credibility with the Study Councils when he was hired,) is proud of how he can frame an immediate need expressed by the superintendents into a broader issue, can bring in some non-traditional guest or speaker or reading, and can do it all in a way the superintendents find useful. Mary Boehm, president of the BellSouth Foundation, praises the role played by Phil Schlecty, a non-superintendent, in providing a "strong intellectual edge, pushing the superintendents to keep thinking about ways to deepen the engagement of all children in learning." By bringing theory in, he has "promoted a deeper level thinking for all of us."

Finding the balance between the perspectives of superintendents and non-superintendents not only affects the planning, but more broadly, how participants work together. Since many of the programs include non-superintendents as critical friends, faculty, or consultants, or quite deliberately bring in CEO advisors from the corporate sector, the difference may affect the larger dynamics of how they all work together. Jane Tedder of the Connecticut Center for School Change notes how important it is that the superintendents not see themselves as "sitting at the feet of the experts." Laraine Roberts, who facilitates the WestEd program, notes how the superintendents "push back" on the guest speakers who come in to share their thinking. Developing norms of respect for the work of superintendents, coupled with the opportunities to learn from other people, other areas, appears to be key.

Another aspect of how the participants work together relates to the nature and purpose of the relationships that develop among the superintendents and other participants. Networking is often praised as one of the big outcomes of these kinds of programs. What does this mean and what kinds of connections are programs trying to make? Hunter Moorman of the Institute for Educational Leadership wonders how many of these programs have networking that is basically haphazard. When it is intentional, he asks, what guides it? Closely related questions are: to what extent is networking focused on providing congenial support or on developing critical friends? How are norms of trust and of challenging one another developed, and by whom?

#### *Developing A Superintendent Learning Community*

In many of the programs surveyed, there were strong signs of the development of a professional learning community among the participants, where individuals shared their personal practice, engaged in creative problem solving with one another, and worked in an environment with common norms and values. Many of the design choices made by these programs contributed to this community: developing trust, respecting the expertise of the superintendents, and utilizing their input to shape the programs. But probably the single most important aspect to building a professional learning community has been to put the work of the superintendents at the center of the program. This has taken a variety of forms, ranging from the use of personal cases for feedback and videotaping in Harvard's Superintendent Leadership Program, the superintendent walkthroughs in Connecticut, where a host superintendent defines a problem s/he is working on and the entire group spends the next half day at that district, observing and giving feedback, in the context of the school district's instructional scale-up plans. Other examples include what Tony Wagner calls "living cases" in the Gates-funded Washington State districts, or the "Action Learning Labs" at WestEd, the rotating site visits at Western Benchmarking, the collaborative inquiry at Columbia, the use of carefully researched district cases at Harvard's Public Education Leadership Program. This strategy of putting real district work at the center in whatever form, is probably the single most important choice point a program makes. As a strategy, it also has important implications for the next topic.

#### **How Does the Work Done in the Program Connect to the District?**

The bottom line for any design for a superintendent executive program is its ability to have impact on the district. There are a variety of different strategies used; some certainly overlap.

All programs address the personal learning of individual superintendents in one way or another, but there are varying approaches to how specifically this is learning in the context of district work. Some, like the Center for Creative Leadership, specifically focus on the individual and her or his leadership development, using a variety of leadership measures and feedback to help in the individual growth. Several programs work on helping superintendents develop leadership capacity in themselves and others. Harvard's Superintendent Leadership Program uses the phrase "Chief Leadership Development Officer" as a way to focus on the importance of superintendents modeling leadership for staff and other stakeholders.

Beyond the personal learning, and the push to model and bring it home, there have been a number of other specific follow-up strategies to help connect to the district:

*Programs for superintendents only* (with no other district staff), have several mechanisms used to connect the work back to the district:

- There can be connections made through modeling, or by the quality and impact of the superintendent decisions. Superintendents may use the approaches they experienced in their own programs to support the professional development of others. Readings from programs are often brought into districts' professional development. In the superintendent-only WestEd program, course materials developed over the year for use by the superintendents get a second use in summer district leadership institutes for deputies and principals.
- Some programs draw experience and work of the districts into the program by using superintendent-written cases (see the paragraph on learning community above).
- Some pull the work of the district in physically by looking at district work, rotating meeting sites, and actually looking at classroom or district processes (see the paragraph on learning community above).
- Some use coaches, as intermediaries, to work over the shoulder of the superintendent, to bring the ideas of the program to the district (and vice versa: in the Harvard Superintendent Leadership Program model, the coaches also bring the work of the districts into the planning and teaching process of the program.)

*Programs that use a district team approach* (where the participants include other district staff or stakeholders) have additional options for connecting the work back to the district:

- The team process at the workshop or program session can itself be an intervention—helping to change the way the key stakeholders in the district interact on the work
- Impacts back at district will be multiplied by having 8-10 individuals returning from the training, ready to try new approaches and behaviors, together and separately
- Coaches may also be used here, to connect the work of the program and district, and also to facilitate the district team interactions

### **Section 3: Remaining Design Consideration Questions**

In the choice points section, I have tried to summarize several of the key design considerations programs face. As I talked to program organizers about these design aspects, several questions emerged that they were continuing to wrestle with—without clear resolution, but important to name:

- For programs that use coaches, what are best strategies for supporting the superintendents and their change efforts at the district, while building capacity, in preparation for the end of the coach's involvement? In what models do the coaches end up taking on too much of the work?
- How much should be laid out ahead of time, and how much constructed with the program participants? How much should be emergent, how much superintendent-driven? How does the evolution of a program affect long-term partner roles?
- How should programs think about sustaining membership in a superintendent support network over time, when the turnover rate for superintendents is so high? If the program involves a district as well, who stays involved with the program if the superintendent leaves for a new job: the superintendent or the district, or both?
- In the programs that have developed strong professional communities of practice, how much of this is emergent in the group dynamics, and to what extent can these norms be designed into the program? (For example, Connecticut's Tedder wonders how much of the strong professional community spirit that has developed there is because the superintendents like and trust each other and how much evolved from their decision to do walkthroughs together.)

## PART 3: A LOOK AT THE EXECUTIVE SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR SUPERINTENDENTS

In this final section, I step back to look at the individual programs as part of a system for the executive education and support of sitting school superintendents. It is a fragmented system, with different sectors providing different services and programs, often without participants' having much knowledge of what others are doing. Issues to explore here are the impact of funding from varied providers and sponsors, the challenges of going to scale with a program once it is deemed successful, questions about building capacity and what is being built, and concerns about evaluating impacts.

### Range of Providers

The range of providers, including the important role of foundation raises some questions about sponsorship and funding.

#### *Sponsorship*

- What is the impact of the type of sponsoring organization on focus and direction?
- What do superintendents do differently when they are running the show—as in the Western States Benchmarking Consortium?
- What are the dynamics of for-profit sponsored programs, and how are they different from the others?
- How are programs different when they are organized by funders who link the superintendent support network to other grants, like the Gates program, or the Wallace Funds in the Harvard Superintendent Leadership Program, or the Connecticut Center for School Reform? How does a program maximize connections between the superintendent program and the grant-making initiative, and how does that affect the superintendent program?
- A number of programs consciously tap into business and corporate expertise—Stanford's Executive Program for Educational Leaders, Harvard's Public Education Leadership Program, the for-profit District Management Council, Western Benchmarking, Aspen, and BellSouth. All do it in somewhat different ways, with little to no coordination, or even sometimes recognition that others are making similar connections.

#### *Funding*

- How much do these programs cost, and what funding patterns that are sustainable? What financial commitments from districts are (and can be) expected? BellSouth's Boehm talks about the importance of the superintendents paying some portion of their travel as a way of "having some skin in the game." Others, like Director Terry Orr of Columbia found that there was a "price point" beyond which superintendents and districts were not willing to participate.
- What is the long-term funding picture? The focus on leadership in education is very hot now. Is it a fad? How will it be sustained? Most of these programs have significant grant support. How much can this work be budgeted as part of the way districts operate?

### Scaling Up Challenges

Several of the programs have faced pressure to expand, in part due to a reputation for success, yet tight interpersonal networks that have developed a professional learning community may become fragmented by major or recurrent expansion.

- What are the best strategies for scaling up successful programs? Superintendents and districts clamor to join the Western Benchmarking group; the Connecticut group seeks to double in size, yet the superintendents in it don't want to be broken up or to expand their numbers.

Western Benchmarking has not taken on new members, but has worked with other groups of districts and the American Association of School Administrators to promote the development of comparable networks, raising some interesting questions about how to balance the transfer of a model and a set of ideas against local needs and conditions. In Connecticut, Tedder sees the need to double: in part, so the group is not seen as exclusive and in part to meet the needs of other superintendents and districts. She worries about balancing stability and change. If a small but tight community of superintendents is working well together, how much does a program try to keep them intact, even as it aims to scale up and serve more people?

### **Where is the Capacity Building?**

If the current boom in programs for sitting superintendents is to have any lasting effect, sustainable beyond any future reductions of interest and funding, capacity must be built. If capacity is being built by the system, where is it? What is the lasting part? Is it in the superintendents? In the districts? In the promising partnerships? In the sponsoring organizations? In the approaches programs are using?

- Foundations and non-profits play a key role in many of these programs, which are often run by knowledgeable, committed individuals who have become very actively involved in the seminars and programs and are very passionate about their value. To what extent is their passion, commitment, and knowledge shared by boards and directors of foundations or non-profits? If most of the capacity building and commitment is in the program directors, but there is not a larger ownership, funding is less likely to be sustained as foundation or non-profit priorities shift. This is especially important, given the paucity of impact evaluation data (see below).
- Self-organizing and self-funding groups like the Western States Benchmarking Consortium represent a new approach, outside of the traditional sectors, with considerable potential to add capacity in the "system." To what extent can this model be spread to other networks, and sustained over time?
- Since universities are deeply rooted institutions with long connections to school leadership, at least on the preparation side, how has their involvement in these executive programs increased their capacity? Particularly interesting to explore are the collaborations between education schools and other professional schools:
  - What are the short and long-term implications of partnerships between schools of education and schools of government, and/or schools of business?
  - What kind of impact will these collaborations have?
  - What kinds of capacity can be built at these partnering units within each university, where, in many cases, professional schools do not routinely collaborate with one another, and where often no real infrastructure to support such partnerships exists?
  - Universities also are the primary arenas for the preparation of superintendents (not the only, as programs like the Broad Foundation's illustrates). To what extent are the ideas, lessons, approaches, and partnerships that are being developed in the executive programs influencing the preparation model? The clearest

example is that of the University of Pittsburgh, where the guidelines for the preservice doctoral program specifically reference the Western Pennsylvania Superintendent's Forum. There is considerable faculty cross over at Harvard, where many of the Education School professors involved in the Urban Superintendent Program. pre-service, work with Business School colleagues in the Public Education Leadership Program. To what extent will that collaboration, and the ideas and approaches used in it influence the preparation of future superintendents?

- Is capacity being built in the programmatic approaches being used, either in the structure of the program, or in individual elements within it?
- Danforth's ten-year commitment of substantial funds for the Superintendents Forum has ended, but the model goes on. Using the same format, but drawing on local funding sources (after initial seed money from Danforth), several Forums continue. *The Superintendent's Fieldbook* (McCabe-Cabron, Cunningham, Harvey & Koff, 2005) captures many of the ideas developed in the Danforth Forum in a way that helps replication and adds value to other networks and programs.
- Specific strategies that form the heart of the professional learning community can represent another form of capacity building. For instance, the notion of superintendent walkthroughs, as developed in Connecticut, may spread and become more common and acceptable practice; the use of detailed district cases, as used by the Gates network and several others, may become a center piece of other support networks. Each of these, and similar efforts to focus the core of the work on instruction and processes within the district, may have long-lasting effects if they spread and are supported elsewhere.

### Implications for Evaluation

Formal evaluations of these programs that go beyond the satisfaction of the members are rare to non-existent. Almost everyone interviewed responded to the question about evaluation with some variation of "we are just getting to that." My original plan was to include a substantial section of this report detailing the evaluation approaches in place, but I did not have enough data to report. Much of this work is in the early stages, and the task of ascribing impacts on district processes or on teaching or learning to any of the interventions offered in these programs is methodologically daunting. Nonetheless, the formative needs of programs to know what is working and what is not for internal tuning, the summative needs of funders and other policymakers to assess impacts, and the needs of the system" to assess successful approaches and spread their use elsewhere make the need for evaluation paramount.

Part of this is a matter of perspective. If the clients are the superintendents, then satisfaction levels might be seen as sufficient measures. Positive responses on surveys, testimonials to their learning, continued attendance and involvement by superintendents are all important markers. If the clients are the students at the district, then the superintendent's involvement in a program is just a small part of a major change that has to be documented in far more complex ways. A chain of events needs to be documented, starting with the superintendent's involvement in a program, moving toward its impact on district processes, on teaching approaches, and ending with improvements in student learning. The Western States Benchmarking Consortium tracks anecdotally dozens of "strategic initiatives of individual member districts that have been influenced by practices in others in the consortium." Several programs have been using outside evaluators to document some parts of this chain. Connecticut Center for School Change has started an examination first of how superintendents talk differently about teaching and learning in their district and further is moving to a compilation of data on changes brought about

at district level as a result of the program. Perhaps furthest along in this chain are the data coming from Gates in Washington, documenting changes in classroom practices in the participating districts. In addition to an independent evaluation of the coaching model in place, and the content of the districts' meetings, the program has been using multiple classroom observations (using a standardized rubric) over time, to track changes in teaching in the schools.

## CONCLUSION

I consider this paper very much a work in progress—a modest study offering a series of snapshots into an area of great importance for the future of American public education. I hope for several useful outcomes for this research. I hope it sparks interest in follow-up looks at the data set collected, as well as more thorough investigations into this issue and its implications.

When I was conducting the interviews, I was struck with a strong sense of passion for the work and its importance. Most of the people I interviewed were working closely with the superintendents and saw this work as critical to school and district improvements. For many of the people I interviewed, I also got a sense of isolation. They were building or coordinating their particular programs for superintendents without, in many cases, having a strong sense of who else was doing what, and how they were doing it. My hope is that the compendium of descriptions in this report helps them (as well as funders, policymakers, and other educators) see this important work in context.

For superintendents, I hope the paper provides a map of the terrain of opportunities for personal professional development. For any associations, foundations, funders, for-profit companies, or universities interested or engaged in superintendent executive leadership training, my hope is the research provides:

- context for their efforts by reporting on what other approaches are being used;
- an opportunity to see parallel as well as different strategies and approaches;
- opportunities for greater impacts through increased coherence and collaboration;
- ideas and challenges for evaluation and capacity building.

For all of us who see the value and the challenges of the superintendent's job, I hope this research provokes some deeper investigations and broader conclusions and questions. The intellectual focus and models of support for existing superintendents that emerge from looking across a variety of programs can provide important evidence of directions needed for pre-service preparation of superintendents. The findings also can contribute to the larger conversation about the challenges of leading school districts, and what are strategies for supporting superintendents in that work. Of particular value in this discussion are input and insights from readers of the Center for Public Leadership *Working Papers* who are engaged in executive training and support programs in other sectors: politics, non-profits, and business.

Finally, the new and innovative collaboration models that are emerging, particularly the roles of superintendent-run organizations like Western Benchmarking, and the innovative work of foundations, non-profits, (and now some for-profits), as well as the collaborations between schools of education and other professional schools, represent some important potential in the development of our society's capacity to support superintendents. I look forward to feedback and further discussion on ways of supporting those who have what many consider to be the toughest job in the country.

**“ For all of us who see the value and the challenges of the superintendent’s job, I hope this research provokes some deeper investigations and broader conclusions and questions.”**

## PROGRAMS INCLUDED IN THIS STUDY

### ***National, State and Regional Superintendent Membership Organizations***

American Association of School Administrators  
 (New) Superintendent Academy, New Jersey Association of School Administrators  
 Project Leadership, Washington Association of School Administrators  
 Western States Benchmarking Consortium

### ***Other Non-Profits (non-Superintendent)***

Aspen Institute Program on Education—Urban Superintendents Network  
 Connecticut Center for School Change—Superintendents Network  
 The Council of Great City Schools  
 Center for Creative Leadership—Leadership at the Peak, and other programs  
 Institute for Education Leadership (IEL)—Educational Policy Fellows Program  
 WestEd—Executive Leadership Center for California Superintendents

### ***University-based Programs***

Columbia University—New Superintendent Seminar Series  
 Harvard University  
 Change Leadership Group  
 Public Education Leadership Program  
 Superintendent Leadership Program  
 University of Pennsylvania—School Study Councils  
 University of Pittsburgh  
 Stanford University—Executive Program for Educational Leaders

### ***Foundations***

BellSouth Foundation—Superintendents Leadership Network  
 Gates Foundation/Washington State  
 Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents Forum

### ***For-profit Companies***

The Educational Research Development Institute  
 The District Management Council

### **Note**

*I welcome reader response; please contact me at "Lee\_Teitel@Harvard.edu". My appreciation goes to Samantha Tan and Sarah Chace, of the Wallace-funded Superintendent Leadership Program at Harvard, who assisted in the preliminary search referenced above in the first paragraph of Part I; to the dozens of people who gave generously of their time to describe the programs surveyed in this work; and to the Wallace Foundation for funding it. I remain solely responsible for its content.*

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