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Expanding the School Reform Horizon LEADS Program Inspires School Restructuring at the District Level

By Marguerite Rigoglioso

Last summer, the Albuquerque Public School district (APS) received a five-year, \$9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Smaller Learning Communities program to transform seven high schools from large, comprehensive schools into small, personalized academic communities. The sum was the highest award possible—an acknowledgment of the particularly fine quality of the district’s application. Rebecca Almeter, director of secondary design at Albuquerque, says it was APS’ in-depth work with a Stanford-led program that gave the district the tools and skills to craft such a high-caliber project.

That program is the School Redesign Network’s Leadership for Equity and Accountability in Districts and Schools (LEADS), one of the few programs in the country dedicated to improving student learning by strengthening leadership and management at the district level. The School Redesign Network (SRN)—a national organization based in the School of Education—was established in 2000, and, in 2007, SRN formed the LEADS network, recognizing that equitable and high-achieving schools are only sustainable when supported by their central offices.

“In our research over the past nine years, we’ve realized that schools that transform themselves successfully have supportive leaders at the higher administrative levels,” says Ash Vasudeva, former SRN co-executive director who left Stanford in the fall to join the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “We’ve seen that for school reform to be sustained and systemic, districts need to be involved.”

As one of eight school districts across the country

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New Faculty Join School of Education

By Rani Reddy-Gil

Since 2009, the Stanford School of Education has brought eight new faculty members on board. Three professors, Paulo Blikstein, Jonathan Osborne, and Mitchell Stevens joined the School last January. Five more—H. Samy Alim, Geoffrey Cohen, Jelena Obradovic, Susan O’Hara, and David Plank—joined this past fall.

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involved in the inaugural LEADS cohort that came together in 2007, Albuquerque—a district of 90,000 students—has participated in summer institutes, district-hosted residencies, and research and development partnerships that have helped them discover in detailed and practical ways how other districts of similar size have successfully managed the challenges associated with improving their schools.

With their deepened knowledge, APS put forward in their grant proposal a sophisticated strategic approach for improving their ninth grade academies. “In previous grants, for example, we gave teachers time off to do planning, which was expensive. As a result, when funds ran out, so did the ability of teachers to collaborate,” explains Almeter. “This time, having incorporated all that we learned from our participation in LEADS, we’ve built time into the high school schedule for teachers to collaborate. That will enable us to keep the process going well beyond the five years of the grant, and I think this was among the numerous elements that made our application successful.”

Promoting New Knowledge and Understanding

Albuquerque’s shift in structural design is just one example of the kinds of systemic changes that LEADS districts have been implementing in their efforts to better serve their students. Through LEADS, cohort members gain additional skills and knowledge to support their school reform initiatives.

The complex challenges urban school districts face are not exclusively education-related, and SRN has developed the LEADS program to respond to that reality. LEADS incorporates the expertise of faculty from Stanford’s schools of education and business, and the Institute of Design at Stanford



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Members of the Knoxville (TN) leadership team share a light moment during a session on “Using Design Thinking as a Tool to Build Sustainable Reform,” taught by faculty from Stanford’s d.school (School of Design).

(d.school), as well as outside experts (former Boston Schools Superintendent Thomas Payzant, for example). These experts work with LEADS district leaders—experts in their own right—to bring the best practices of business and education to the specific challenges LEADS districts are facing in their reform work.

“Educational leadership is a far more challenging occupation than it used to be,” says **Linda Darling-Hammond**, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education and the founding director of SRN. “In order to create high-performing schools and the districts that support them, today’s leaders must understand organizational theory and management principles just as thoroughly as educational theory and practice. LEADS is structured to bring that knowledge to the table, and to help leaders create tangible action plans and use the collective expertise of the network to put those plans into place.”

Dean **Deborah Stipek** adds, “The implicit, sometimes explicit, theory guiding the work of LEADS is that districts are there to support effective teaching, and every practice and policy needs to be assessed in that light.”

The districts in the first cohort—Albuquerque, Austin, Knox County (TN), Mapleton (CO), Miami-Dade, Milwaukee, North East Independent (San Antonio, TX),

and San Francisco Unified School District—were invited to apply to the LEADS network based on their existing involvement in and ongoing commitment to redesigning secondary education and central office systems. Tuition for each district to participate is \$35,000 annually, an amount generously supplemented by a variety of grants from such donors as the Goldman Sachs Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and The Stanford Challenge’s Initiative on Improving K-12 Education.

A core piece of the LEADS program is the Summer Session, held for the past three summers at Stanford (see sidebar on page 15). At Summer Session, executive leadership teams made up of superintendents, chief academic officers, board members, principals, and teacher leaders come together for seminars and small-group workshops developed by SRN staff in collaboration with district leaders. In addition to intensive, hands-on sessions with leading education, business, and d.school faculty, participants work within their own teams with SRN facilitators to apply their learning to district-specific issues.

“LEADS is not a one-size-fits all model. It’s driven by the specific needs of our network members,” notes former SRN Network Director **Peter Ross (BA ’90 in International Relations, PhD ’08)**. “We also operate on

the principle that knowledge does not just reside in the university, but also in the network itself.”

On-Site, Relevant Learning

Toward that end, the program schedules two annual residential events at the districts themselves. Residencies allow district team members to more deeply study exemplary management practices or policies in such areas as building sustainability into reform efforts, managing data effectively, and balancing autonomy and accountability across a portfolio of schools.

in a three-day session on differentiated district supports for schools. MPS Superintendent William Andrekopoulos and central office leaders shared their story, and participants then visited K-8 schools, regular and charter high schools, and sites that house multiple schools. During their visits, participants were asked to make observations on how well the schools were engaging students, being culturally responsive, setting high expectations based on learning targets, and making strategic instructional choices.

“With the professional learning commu-

Facilitating and Sharing Research

Research collaborations have also been a critical part of the experience for LEADS network members. MPS, for example, benefited from a collaboration with Montgomery, who wrote his dissertation on one of the district’s most pressing issues: how to achieve instructional coherence across schools, especially given Milwaukee’s abundance of autonomous charter schools. For several months, through work funded by a Joyce Foundation grant, Montgomery sat in on meetings and interviewed and observed scores of central-office and school-site staff. He then analyzed the data and made recommendations on how MPS could create better and more consistent learning environments.

A latecomer to the network’s first cohort is the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). SFUSD joined to get support for their work in addressing one of the most enduring problems in education today: the achievement gap. “We consider the achievement gap to be a civil rights issue,” says SFUSD Superintendent of Schools Carlos Garcia. “We asked LEADS to provide us with information and processes on how

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– Peter Ross (BA ’90 in International Relations, PhD ’08)

“Many districts share the same issues, even though they’re in different parts of the country,” observes **Ken Montgomery (MA ’03, PhD ’09)**, who recently left his position as a research analyst with SRN to become assistant principal for instruction at Capuchino High School in San Bruno, CA. “The residencies give teams the opportunity to learn from one another—and allow LEADS staff to learn about issues on the ground level.” In the first two years of the network, Miami-Dade County, Milwaukee, Austin, and Mapleton have hosted residencies, at which participants focus on a specific topic and then consider it through the lens of the host district.

In March 2008, for example, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) led LEADS network participants

nity LEADS has facilitated, we’ve developed relationships with people all across the country,” says Marty Lexmond, director of school innovation with the Milwaukee Public Schools. “Given the trust that’s been built among us, we receive feedback on our work that was honest, and therefore truly valuable.”

A smoking pen in the hands of Austin (TX) leadership team member Trent Sharp, working with fellow team members Kent Ewing and Patti Everitt to map out strategies for furthering their district reform.



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schools can reverse the predictive power of demographics.”

“To address this problem, we’ve gotten SFUSD to rethink the roles of central office leaders, school staff, principals, and teachers,” says Ash Vasudeva. LEADS has provided the district with case studies and data on other schools that have been successful in closing the achievement gap, and has supported the district as it refines its strategic plan. Especially helpful for SFUSD has been the opportunity to learn from other LEADS districts engaged in high-level systems reform. “We’ve used [our time at LEADS events] as opportunities to ‘steal’ great ideas,” Garcia says. “We’ve incorporated a lot of the feedback from network members into our plan, particularly regarding how we intend to measure what we call creating ‘joyful learners’—engaged, interested students—as a core piece of closing the achievement gap.”

SFUSD has in fact turned the challenge of measuring engagement over to the schools themselves to solve. One result has been the creation of student and community surveys to assess the degree to which students feel the classroom is engaging and the curriculum is relevant and, most important, culturally inclusive. The district has also required schools to create balanced scorecards that demonstrate how each will align teaching goals with the district’s strategic plan. Along the way, LEADS has not only provided information and feedback, but it is documenting SFUSD’s activities, creating case studies on the district’s innovations in school reform that others will be able to use

“LEADS has been a good broker, pointing us in all the right directions,” says Garcia. “They’re not just about theory—they keep it real. They give us concrete examples of how you can do this work successfully.”

Meanwhile, APS is fully immersed in



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Mapleton (CO) district administrator Damon Brown listens as Stanford Graduate School of Business Professor Hayagreeva Rao speaks on “The Ergonomics of Innovation.”

implementing the first phase of its Smaller Learning Communities grant, with close guidance from SRN, through an additional contract with the organization.

“SRN’s involvement with the Albuquerque federal SLC grant allows us the chance to spend real time with the people in the district, both by having them here at Stanford, and by getting into their schools and classrooms,” says **Linda J. Carstens**, SRN’s Director of Professional Learning. “It’s a wonderful opportunity to work shoulder-to-shoulder with the main change agents in the process.”

Through this project, APS is receiving technical assistance and access to research, and central office leaders, principals, and teachers have attended meetings and study tours of successful small schools. The study tours took APS teams to Hillsdale High School in San Mateo, CA—a school recognized nationally for its successful conversion from a comprehensive high school to smaller learning communities. Last October, LEADS site teams conducted a two-day evaluation of the seven APS schools identified for redesign. Focusing on the ninth grade environment at each school, the teams assessed how APS could target grant resources and tailor professional learning of teachers.

One of the major outcomes of the two-day session with APS was the realization

that all students—whether gifted, honors, English language learners, or special education—would benefit from being in heterogeneous,

mixed-ability small learning environments. “SRN has helped us take the blinders off regarding who was in our classrooms,” says APS’ Rebecca Almeter. “We’ve become passionate about equity, be it students with mixed abilities or those from diverse cultures. We now have the skills to make sure all kinds of students are honored in our instruction.”

What’s Next

The pioneer district cohort is entering its third and final year of formal participation in the LEADS network. After their third year concludes, the original districts will continue their association with LEADS informally through continued collaborations with the network and with Stanford.

Meanwhile, LEADS’ second cohort is gearing up, with a number of districts expressing strong interest in participating, including Alexandria City Public Schools, Dallas Independent School District, Omaha Public Schools, and The School District of Philadelphia.

For SRN and its district partners, fostering an excellent education for all students is at the heart of this effort. “We’re proud of the fact that we’re connecting theory to practice in ways that are helping district leaders, school leaders, and teachers help students,” says Peter Ross. “Ultimately it’s the students who are our bottom line.” **SE**

At LEADS Summer Session, District Leaders Get their Hands Dirty

By Marguerite Rigoglioso

What does designing a shopping cart in just five days have to do with improving our nation's schools? One sunny morning last June, a room full of district and school leaders was finding out. They watched a video segment from the television show, *Nightline*, on how the famous Palo Alto design firm, IDEO, carried out a challenge to brainstorm and prototype a unique rolling basket.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, the Atholl McBean Professor in the Graduate School of Business, used the *Nightline* segment to illustrate effective innovation. "What lessons did you take from this for your own district as it addresses reform challenges?" he asked the group. Hands went up: Create diverse teams without hierarchy. Talk to and observe your end users. Be open to wild ideas. Know that the wisdom of the team is greater than that of any individual. Stay focused. And, most important, have fun.

For an entire week each June, these superintendents, chief academic officers, board members, union representatives, principals, teacher leaders, and community leaders come to Stanford for the LEADS Summer Session, where they get to take on the role of student now and then. Hailing

reform agendas: one district might be concerned with principal development, another focused on implementing district-wide curriculum, and another looking for ways to improve student achievement through data-driven assessments. Summer Session is structured to support each district team's agenda and to give all the teams tools to move forward effectively.

At the most recent Summer Session, during the first "team time" of the week, participants from Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) applied what they had learned from the morning session to the real world, where, as Rao has stressed, "clean theory" gives way to "dirty hands."

As members of the Department of Educational Services, they quickly identified their main goal for the week: getting a handle on how their newly formed office should organize its work. Their conversation centered on how they might create non-hierarchical, project-based leadership teams. Equipped with strategies from presentations earlier in the day, they focused on their own group process and brainstormed possibilities without censorship. It was clear from the laughter and camaraderie that they were having a good time, too.

By the end of the week, Summer Session participants had heard from Graduate School of Business faculty members **Jeffrey Pfeffer** and **Chip Heath** on leading change in challenging times and developing specific techniques for creating such change, Stanford's Institute of Design Lecturer **Rich Crandall** on using design-thinking strategies to address challenges in K-12 districts, and Tony Bryk, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, on building knowledge management systems to improve instruction. Drawing on these ideas, the Milwaukee team constructed a unique organizational chart for its department that is circular, rather than top-down. In the center were the schools themselves.

"We realized it's not about us. It's about organizing around schools to serve kids better," explains Marty Lexmond, director of school innovation at MPS. "Summer Session has been a phenomenal experience that has allowed us to gain clarity on this extremely important aspect of our departmental identity. We enter this new phase truly fortified." **SE**

"Summer Session has been a phenomenal experience that has allowed us to gain clarity... We enter this new phase truly fortified." – Marty Lexmond

from the eight school districts participating in the School Redesign Network's LEADS initiative (see feature on page 1), they spend an intensive week soaking up all they can from Stanford education, business, and design faculty about developing strategic action plans to support their district reform work.

Summer Session is an event held for LEADS network members each year since 2007—one of several events members have the opportunity to participate in annually as part of the network's sustained learning program. Each year network members arrive with a common purpose: to further their district reform work. They also arrive with very diverse