

HANDBOOK 5: Providing Leadership at the District Level

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This handbook is one of a series published for the project Collaboration for Excellence: The North Dakota Curriculum Project.

The publication is free to public school educators in North Dakota, who may make copies without permission.

These handbooks represent a team product. A major contributor was Ann Clapper, who was previously Director of the Office of Curriculum Leadership and Improvement. Numerous educators in North Dakota reviewed all these materials and made valuable suggestions. Especially helpful were the following North Dakota educators: Janet Edlund, Dakota Prairie High School; Cheryl Kuhas, North Dakota Department of Public Instruction; Karen Nelson, Hettinger; Sandra Willprecht, Forman. Allan A. Glatthorn, Distinguished Research Professor at East Carolina University, served as consultant to the project.

It should be emphasized that the processes suggested here should be seen only as recommendations, not mandates. The authors value the ability of North Dakota educators to develop their own processes that reflect the needs and resources of their schools.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

In the 1980s researchers and practitioners focused on the **school** itself as the chief agent for educational quality; such a focus culminated in the “Effective Schools” movement. More recently, however, those same scholars and leaders have realized that leadership of the **school system** is essential if schools are to improve.

Rather than arguing about the relative importance of effective school systems or effective schools, it makes more sense to work towards a symbiotic relationship that recognizes the importance of each. (For the research support here, see Cotton, 1995.)

School System/School Relationships: Desirable Features

The specifics of such a dynamic relationship will obviously vary with the size of the school system and the number of schools in the system. However, the following principles derived from the literature will generally apply.

District Leaders

District leaders include the school board, the superintendent, and members of the central office staff. Their responsibilities:

- ! Work with school leaders to develop policies and procedures that recognize the legitimate authority of the school system, while granting the schools the autonomy necessary to achieve excellence.
- ! Establish a culture of cooperation and collaborative problem solving that avoids excessive competitiveness and adversarial relationships.
- ! Provide to school leaders the professional development required to make them effective leaders, ensuring that such programs reflect school leaders’ input and respond to school leaders’ needs.
- ! Collaborate with school leaders in developing and implementing systems to evaluate school effectiveness. Also, assist school leaders in using the results of such evaluations to facilitate continuous school improvement.
- ! With input from school leaders, monitor the schools’ implementation of school district policies and procedures.
- ! Insulate schools from external political and economic turbulence.
- ! Recognize and reward schools that achieve excellence. Avoid making disparaging comments about less successful schools and their leaders.
- ! Provide resources to schools in such a manner that demonstrates equity while

acknowledging that individual schools' needs will differ.

- ! Develop in central office staff beliefs and attitudes that emphasize their role as resources for the schools and minimize their role as monitors and enforcers.
- ! Communicate openly with school leaders in a timely manner, without burdening them with information overload.

School Leaders

School leaders include the principal, the assistant principals, team leaders, and teacher leaders. Their responsibilities:

- ! Develop school policies that complement and support district policies.
- ! Establish a school culture that supports collaboration and cooperation at all levels.
- ! Participate actively and productively in district-sponsored professional development programs.
- ! Systematically evaluate school improvement efforts, providing accurate and full information to district leaders.
- ! Underscore with staff the importance of compliance with school board policies and monitor such compliance.
- ! Keep district leaders informed about school situations that might lead to external turbulence.
- ! In communicating with parents and other community members, acknowledge the support of district leaders. Avoid making disparaging statements about district staff.
- ! Make reasonable and honest requests for resources.
- ! Use central office staff effectively and make them feel welcome in schools.
- ! Communicate openly with district leaders in a timely manner, without burdening them with problems that should be solved at the school level.

As indicated by these responsibilities, school leaders and district leaders must cooperate with each other.

School-Based Management: A Special Case

School-based management is a special instance of district/school collaboration. Again the specifics of how school-based management should operate will vary from system to system. However, the following recommendations drawn from the literature can provide guidelines to those directing and operating such programs (Glatthorn, 1997).

- ! Keep in mind that school-based management is only a means to an end, not an end unto itself: all that matters is student learning. The research in general suggests that school-based management neither facilitates nor interferes with student learning.
- ! Set up explicit guidelines about the authority and responsibility of school-based

leadership teams.

- ! Allocate to the schools decision-making authority about such important issues as resource utilization, instructional methods, and schedules. Avoid burdening them with administrative trivia.
- ! Train school-based leadership teams in the specific skills they need, such as decision-making, conflict resolution, and legal aspects of school operations. Encourage them to learn from experience by assuming leadership in one area at a time.
- ! Ensure that leadership teams are broadly inclusive and representative: administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and students.
- ! Give the leadership team real authority so that they are not simply an advisory board.
- ! Develop and implement procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of the school-based management program.
- ! Provide the resources needed by school-based leadership teams.
- ! Recognize the achievements of school-based management teams and support the program with appropriate praise.
- ! Anticipate problems. Recognize the fact that school-based management programs will have their own ups and downs. The research indicates that teacher morale will improve in the early years of such programs, but will decline after the initial enthusiasm.

Curriculum Development in a School-Based System

Some curriculum experts have argued that school-based management teams should have sole authority about the curriculum. The position taken here is that the school district should develop a coordinated curriculum for all schools, grades kindergarten to 12. Individual schools can then build upon and supplement the district curriculum.

The importance of the district curriculum is supported by three arguments:

(1) **Effectiveness**

The research clearly indicates that a well-coordinated and comprehensive curriculum is much more effective than a fragmented one where each school develops its own curriculum. (See Corbett & Wilson, 1992.) This is especially the case in such subjects as mathematics, where the curriculum in one grade level builds upon the work of the previous year and provides a foundation for the years to come.

(2) **Equity**

A district curriculum is one means for ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to learn, regardless of the school they attend. In districts where each school develops its own curriculum, disparities in quality are certain to develop.

(3) **Efficiency**

A district curriculum is more efficient to operate in such areas as staff development, textbook procurement, and curriculum evaluation.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL BOARD

The role of the school board and the board's relationship with the superintendent are matters for local determination. Here again only general guidelines can be provided. Although a relatively thin knowledge base exists, the reports of best practice provide a somewhat reliable foundation for the recommendations that follow.

The Curriculum Role of the Local School Board

As the officially designated representatives of the state, the local school board is legally responsible for approving the district curriculum, ensuring that it responds to the needs of the community served, and carrying out specified state policies. However, in the most effective school systems, the board exercises functions that go beyond simply approving what is presented to them.

! **Work collaboratively with the superintendent.**

" While a school board and the superintendent will often differ about specific actions, the most effective board knows how to cooperate with the superintendent in finding win/win solutions. The school board should model collaboration and constructive problem solving. Such collaboration is not simply a device for avoiding conflict. Instead, both parties understand that conflict can be productive and that they are all united in a common pursuit--providing a quality education.

! **Critically review all proposals to develop a new curriculum.**

" While the school board will evaluate the curriculum guide once it has been developed, a careful review of a proposal before the project begins can prevent problems down the road. The superintendent can assist in this pre-development review by preparing a form similar to the one shown in Display 5-1.

! **Provide a mechanism for systematic community input.**

" Each board should establish a Curriculum Advisory Council that reports to the board. Such a council, broadly representative of the community, has several functions:

- make general suggestions to the board about curriculum content;
- alert the board to curriculum problems that seem to be developing; and
- provide a forum for those who have complaints about specific curricular issues.

" Some boards feel that such advisory groups undermine the legitimate authority of the board; however, this issue is not likely to develop if the council has been fully informed that it advises the board and does not make policy.

" Even in districts with such a council, sharp differences will develop between what seem to be the wishes of the community, construed broadly, and the recommendations of professional educators. To resolve these differences, the board should understand that it represents the entire community, not the small splinter groups that often make the loudest noises and should ensure that everyone has an opportunity to voice suggestions or complaints, as long as all such persons abide by board regulations with respect to public meetings.

Display 5-1: Curriculum Proposal Example

March 23, 2002

Curriculum area: Science

Chief features of new curriculum:

1. Greater emphasis on solving science problems.
2. Emphasis on societal impact of scientific discoveries.
3. Additional requirements for graduation.

Areas of possible community controversy:

Evolution as a scientific theory; Creationism as a religious belief.

Schedule

Plan: April, 2002

Produce: May-September, 2002

Pilot: School Year 2002-2003

Implement: September, 2003

Use of state standards

Extensive. Supplemented by selective use of professional standards.

Budget

Total cost estimate: \$20,000; details follow.

- " When controversial issues arise, the board should make decisions primarily on the basis of what is best for the students, while at the same time staying within the limits of the law and commonly accepted principles of ethical conduct.

Suppose, for example, that a majority of the community want Creationism taught, instead of evolution; a minority in the community believe that no reference should be made to Creationism. After listening to arguments from both sides the board might develop the following guidelines for the science curriculum.

- * *Science teachers should indicate that Creationism is a religious belief held by many Christians. It is not the role of the schools to criticize or hold up to scorn any religious belief, unless that belief violates commonly accepted ethical principles.*
- * *They should emphasize that evolution is a scientific theory about the origin of life--one that is supported by a large body of research and accepted without*

reservation by most scientists.

! Establish policies

- " The school board should establish policies that give direction to educators about the processes for curriculum development and implementation. Policies are especially needed in areas of curriculum where standard operations are desirable. For example, the board should have a policy and related procedures about how citizen complaints are to be handled.

3. ALLOCATING LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

The literature suggests that most superintendents are very busy people, stressed from working too hard on budgets, buses, and boards. Any expectation that they can crowd curriculum leadership into such busy schedules must take cognizance of their work overload. The position taken here is that it makes more sense to define the functions of curriculum leadership that must occur at the school system level, letting each superintendent decide what can best be delegated to whom.

Curriculum Leadership Functions

A systematic allocation of curriculum responsibilities will assist the district in achieving curriculum excellence. One allocation method:

- (1) **Create a matrix of functions and responsible persons.**
 - List all functions down the left side of the table. List all committees and individuals who will perform the various functions across the top.
- (2) **Identify responsible parties.**
 - For each function, identify one person or committee who is primarily responsible. Enter the symbol "R" in the appropriate cell.
- (3) **Identify contributors.**
 - For each function, decide which committees or individuals can contribute to this function. Enter the symbol "C" in the appropriate cell.
- (4) **Check functions.**
 - Make sure that each function has one person who is primarily responsible and one or more individuals or committees who can contribute.
- (5) **Check people.**
 - Make sure that any single individual or committee isn't overloaded with too many responsibilities.

See Display 5-2 for an example of how this matrix might look.

**Display 5-2:
Curriculum Leadership Functions**

Functions	SU	AS	CAC	CCC	SAC	CW	COS	OTH
Inform board of curriculum work	R	C						
Prepare curriculum policies								
Secure board approval for curriculum	R	C						
Make curricular plans				R			C	
Allocate curriculum resources								
Develop principal curricular skills								
Appoint curriculum committees								
Evaluate curriculum								
Inform public of curriculum work								
Select texts								
Administer curriculum-based tests								
Develop district curriculum processes								
Select, train, evaluate central office staff								
Align curriculum								
Assist teachers in implementing curriculum								

ROLES: SU=Superintendent; AS= Assistant Superintendent or Director of Curriculum; CAC=Citizen Advisory Council; CCC=Curriculum Coordinating Council; SAC=Subject Area Committee; CW=Curriculum Writers; COS=Central Office Supervisor; OTH=Other staff or committees.
RESPONSIBILITIES: R=Primarily responsible for this function; C=Contribute to this function

This allocation of functions is a critical decision that involves issues of “turf,” staff sensitivities, and administrative budgets. For this reason, the process should not be hurried or made unilaterally. The input of those to be affected should certainly be solicited. In addition to weighing the abilities of staff and their other responsibilities, those making the allocations should review research that can guide their decision making (see Display 5-3). The implications of these research findings are clear.

- ! Weigh carefully any decision to reduce central office staff. Such reduction may ultimately reduce school effectiveness.
- ! Clarify the specific responsibilities of central office staff and communicate these responsibilities to staff, school administrators, and teachers.
- ! Provide professional development to central office staff that will develop their skills in serving schools.
- ! Monitor the performance of the central office staff to ensure that they are effectively delivering services to the schools.

A Concluding Note

Keep your eyes on results. All these committees and processes are designed solely to strengthen the curriculum as a means of improving learning. If your district is getting good results without costly inefficiency, you are better off not tampering.

Display 5-3: Research on District Curriculum

- ! “. . . Larger, better financed district offices may be more successful than principals or other administrators in ensuring that dollars actually reach the classroom.” (Wenglinsky, 1997, pp. 26-27)
 - ! District personnel have only vague notions of their specific responsibilities; similarly, teachers were unclear about the responsibilities of district personnel. (Hall, Putman, & Hord, 1985)
 - ! Most instructional supervisors spend most of their time in routine maintenance functions, although they would like to spend more time on curriculum and instruction. (Richardson, 1987)
 - ! Teachers generally hold a negative view about central office supervisors. When they want help about subject content or methodology, they tend to turn to expert colleagues, who are close at hand. (Glatthorn, 1998)
 - ! The influence of central office supervisors is “earned” through frequent interactions with principals and teachers; these interactions generate mutual trust and understanding. (Pajak, Adamson, & Rhoades, 1998)
 - ! Several studies conclude that adding subject specialists to the central office staff is a sound way to improve the implementation of curricula and support a quality educational program. (Pajak, Adamson, & Rhoades, 1998)
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