Leadership Council Meeting Report: May 9 – 10, 2013

Each year, the Learning First Alliance convenes the executive directors, senior staff and elected leadership of member organizations to address the issues facing our nation's public schools and how members can work together to improve public education.

May 9, 2013

What Do We Know About “Reformers”
Warren Simmons, Executive Director, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University

As the provocateur of the 2013 Leadership Council Meeting, Warren Simmons, executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, kicked off the two-day summit by engaging attendees in a dialogue on school reform and the need to shift the current narrative on public education that is in place today – “bad teachers, bad schools and broken systems.” “It is not enough for us to just be at the table. It is time for us to design and set the table instead of waiting to be invited to it,” Simmons said, urging attendees to take a pro-active reform approach.

During the keynote, Simmons provided historical context -- from the 1960s to today – around school reform movements, stressing the importance of more efficiently and effectively using the lessons learned from these movements to meet federal accountability goals, effectively strengthen our current system, and ultimately drive change.

Simmons challenged attendees to create a new narrative that uses design principles and addresses system, student and community needs – something missing from the so-called “reformers” agenda, which he believes saves individuals at the expense of communities. He emphasized the need to take a smart building-capacity approach to bring change to scale and the overarching importance of collaboration among districts, communities and other partners in making reform a successful reality.

How District Level Collaboration Improves Student Achievement
Saul Rubenstein, Associate Professor, School of Management & Labor Relations, Rutgers University

Saul Rubenstein shared compelling data from his study of seven long-term public school district partnerships that showed the importance of collaboration in driving student achievement. He pointed out that each of these successful partnerships, which involved teachers, building and district leaders, unions and other stakeholders, shared four key themes: motivation to collaborate, strategic priorities, supportive system infrastructure and sustaining factors.

The data showed a strong, positive and statistically significant association between quality partnerships and student performance. It also showed that quality partnerships can act as a collaboration network hub, resulting in increased communication among teachers and principals and among principals and union representatives, all of which ultimately impact student achievement.
After presenting evidence showing that collaborative school reform can have a dramatic impact on teaching and student achievement, Rubenstein provided recommendations on how to create and sustain effective, quality partnerships, including implementing incentivized approaches, building a culture of collaboration, creating learning networks across districts and states for the sharing of best practices, convening at conferences, and more. He stressed that it is essential to keep in mind that reform does not work when it is top-down and that innovation will not be sustained and institutionalized without widespread support from state and federal policy.

This presentation led into a collaborative working session among attendees that focused on recommendations that LFA and each of the member organizations could use to advance their work. Emerging and recurring themes included creating a common message, committing to collaboration and focusing on the positive – rather than highlighting the negative – aspects of public education.

May 10, 2013

Collaboration for Common Core Implementation

Panel #1
Moderator: Kim Anderson, NEA
Panelists: Stu Silberman, Executive Director, Prichard Committee, Kentucky; Mary Ann Blankenship, Executive Director, Kentucky Education Association; Candice McQueen, Dean, College of Education, Lipscomb University

This panel discussion began with a focus on the necessity of district and state collaboration in the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and highlighted how the state of Kentucky, the first state to adopt the standards, has taken a leadership role in modelling such behavior.

The panelists from the state discussed the measures they took at the onset of the adoption of the standards to prepare teachers for it, including a one-and-a-half year campaign informing them what the standards are, what they entail, and why the state supports them, all of which led to overall buy-in from the teachers. They also set the expectation with teachers, parents and the media that the first round of assessments would likely result in lower test scores. When this happened, teachers and parents were prepared because of the exemplary communication and outreach of the state. The panelists also discussed the importance of state collaboration with stakeholders in securing funding to ensure that teachers will receive the ongoing professional support needed to teach to the CCSS.

Candice McQueen then spoke about the importance of training pre-service teachers for the Common Core and what Lipscomb’s College of Education is doing in this area, including creating best practice models, videos, materials and training on the new standards for the pre-service program and piloting and developing various coaching and training models. Through this ongoing initiative, their graduates will be better equipped with the knowledge and training needed to effectively teach to the CCSS.

Panel #2
Moderator: Francine Lawrence, AFT
Panelists: Mark Baumgartner, Executive Board, Cleveland Teacher Union; Melissa Watts, Principal, William Cullen Bryant School, Cleveland Public Schools; Valarie Bordenkircher, President, Quincy Federation of Teachers, Illinois; Marilyn Smith, Mentor Teacher Leader, Quincy Public Schools, Illinois

This panel discussed effective practices for CCSS implementation from two best practice districts – Quincy Public Schools and Cleveland Public Schools – both of which have close, collaborative partnerships with their respective teacher unions.
The panelists from Quincy Public Schools provided details on their outreach initiative called “Commit to the Core,” which is advised and monitored by a steering committee of key stakeholders – teachers, administrators, union officials, PTA members, representatives from a local university and others – and is designed to educate, engage and enlist support from the community regarding the new standards. The community outreach includes public service announcements, flyers in the local newspaper, community forums, trainings for preschool and daycare providers, pre- and post-community and parent surveys, and more. The panelists discussed the success of this initiative as defined by community members now being educated on the standards and proactive in taking steps to help prepare students for them.

The panelists representing Cleveland Public Schools then provided details on their CCSS implementation initiatives which are part of the state’s three-year pilot of the standards before assessments begin in 2014. Their overall implementation strategy is a three-pronged approach focusing on awareness, training, and curriculum and assessment writing. It includes support for each, including workshops, appointing a Common Core Advocate for each building and more. The panelists believe that even though teachers and leaders are embracing the standards, high levels of support are needed in order to transform student learning. Watts also reiterated the importance of informing parents of the changes ahead, in addition to preparing the teachers.

LFA Education Visionary Award and Remarks
Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education, Stanford University

After receiving the third annual LFA Education Visionary Award for her continued leadership in teacher quality, educational equity and school reform, Linda Darling-Hammond spoke candidly about the current education climate, specifically in regards to the CCSS. While a supporter of the new standards, Darling-Hammond warned of the negative effects the standards could have on education if they are not implemented carefully and thoughtfully, including – public schools being labeled as failures, teacher churn, the prospect of privatization, wasted investment, and more.

Darling-Hammond reiterated that now is a crucial time in public education-, “We’re in a moment where we need to decide if we’re going to free fall or reclaim public education,” she said. To change the perception of public education, especially in the Common Core era, Darling-Hammond proposed three calls-to-action for LFA and its member organizations: develop a new policy agenda, create the building blocks needed for education and tell the good news. Included in the building blocks of education were taking care of our nation’s children, lobbying for funding and equity in funding, professionalizing teaching in the community, lobbying for good standards, and placing focus on successful schools.

After urging attendees to get busy, Darling-Hammond engaged them in a discussion on a myriad of topics around the public education climate and the CCSS: the need to change the public conversation around public education, including the need for a clear message in doing so, the need to focus on professional development around the standards, and the need for collaboration among stakeholders – parents, teachers, unions, school boards, and others. – to move public education forward.

Conversation with the U.S. Department of Education
Denise Forte, Acting Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation and Policy, U.S. Department of Education

Forte provided attendees with an overview of the Department of Education’s work in President Obama’s first term, highlighting the increase in graduation rates nationwide – currently at the highest it has been in decades – and the academic gains made by Hispanic students. She noted, however, that there is still a long way to go, especially regarding the achievement gap.

Forte said the Department is focused on low income students, programs to ensure students are going to – and completing – college, and preschool and early childhood education initiatives. The Department is
prioritizing funding for these areas, as well as school turnaround, teacher and leader development, school data to guide data-driven decision making and more. In addition to early education and K-12 education, the Department is also looking to move more of its work into the area of college affordability, something that they have been pushing states to act on.

Regarding the Common Core, a recurring theme of the Leadership Council Meeting, attendees learned that Secretary Arne Duncan is sensitive to the implementation timeline and teacher expectations, and he has talked about the idea of a moratorium that was discussed earlier in the meeting. Forte encouraged LFA to reach out to the Department with their collective thoughts and concerns on this issue to continue the dialogue.