Leadership Council Meeting Report: May 15 – 16, 2014

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 15, 2014

LFA Education Visionary Award

Governor James B. Hunt

To kick off the 2014 Leadership Council Meeting, the Learning First Alliance (LFA) named Governor James B. Hunt as the recipient of the fourth annual Education Visionary Award. For more than 35 years, Gov. Hunt, the former Governor of North Carolina and foundation chair of The Hunt Institute, has been dedicated to – and actively working toward – the improvement of public education from early childhood to higher education. Judith Rizzo, executive director and CEO of the Hunt Institute, accepted the award on Gov. Hunt’s behalf and spoke about the need for collaboration to promote the importance and successes of public education.

Designing an Effective Communication Strategy

Suhail Farooqui, CEO, K12 Insight

As the keynote speaker of the 2014 Leadership Council Meeting, Suhail Farooqui, CEO of K12 Insight, discussed the two deficits plaguing public education: the fiscal deficit and the trust deficit, the latter of which he noted has been in uncharted territory for some time. To address the trust deficit, Farooqui suggested that there needs to be a change in the way the public, especially the “silent majority” (those who are not hyper vocal either positively or negatively), are kept informed and engaged in the conversation about public education today.

Without engaging this large group of stakeholders, Farooqui warned of a potential decline in student enrollment in public schools as parents seek alternative schooling options, which (along with a host of other issues) contributes to declining teacher morale. He emphasized the importance of public education driving its brand versus the brand driving public education to make sure a positive narrative is conveyed to this group and to prevent such issues.

Social media, particularly the use of Twitter, was noted as a powerful communication tool that education organizations could use to convey their message and engage the public. Farooqui suggested organizations use this tool, as well as others, to “fight for their agenda.” In doing so, he noted that it is important to go beyond just informing people – the message should stir emotion and always provide context.

Farooqui introduced the idea of “listen, learn, lead” as the basis for a successful communication strategy. He spoke of the importance of being responsive to the public’s questions, having a dashboard for an
Building a Collaborative Communications Plan

Heath Morrison, Superintendent, Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) Public Schools, 2012 AASA Superintendent of the Year

Building upon Farooqui’s presentation, Heath Morrison, superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools, spoke of his successes in engaging his community as the former superintendent of Washoe County School District in Reno, NV. As an incoming leader of a district with an extremely high dropout rate, Morrison knew that he needed to have a collaborative communications plan – one that involved all stakeholders – to drive change, which he did by completely overhauling the communications system that was in place.

“It’s not just about improving education, we must also take charge of advocating for public education,” said Morrison. “We must have a successful brand, and we must be good marketers.”

Morrison said that the three primary messages the community cares about are school safety, academic achievement, and how their tax dollars are being spent. And, he noted that organizations must be proactive in conveying messages regarding these topics. He emphasized the importance of engaging in ongoing internal and external communication, taking an intentional approach to conveying one’s message, and communicating positive news to stakeholders and the public as part of his district’s turnaround success. He said that communications to the public must be constant and that leaders must think about their brand strategically and then work to make it a reality.

This presentation led to a collaborative working session among attendees, during which they identified key components of an effective communication strategy based on the information presented during the preceding sessions. Attendees then shared how these key message points could be used by their own organizations, as well as collectively by LFA.

May 16, 2014

Conversation with the U.S. Department of Education

Scott Sargrad, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Strategic Initiatives, U.S. Department of Education

Scott Sargrad provided attendees with an overview of the Department of Education’s recent work, particularly focused on college and career readiness and ESEA flexibility. As a result of this flexibility – the waiver process – Sargrad highlighted improved graduation rates and other student outcomes. He also noted the department’s continued work with states as they implement new teacher evaluation systems, reinforcing the importance of the department working collaboratively with states to provide them the resources needed to succeed with these initiatives.

Sargrad then asked attendees and their respective organizations to focus on four key things at the local level: 1.) Make smart adjustments throughout the process of implementing key initiatives associated with their waivers and communicate those adjustments to the state, 2.) Have ongoing communication with communities about the successes of the initiatives in place, 3.) Emphasize that school improvement happens at the state level, 4.) Have open dialogue between state and federal leaders.

Later in the conversation, LFA representatives voiced the need for the Department to start talking about the successes of public schools and to be true advocates for public education. Sargrad encouraged the
LFA to reach out to the Department with their collective thoughts and concerns on any and all public education issues to continue the dialogue, as well as with ways that LFA and its member organizations can increase their engagement with the Department.

**Building a Collaborative Culture for School Improvement**  
*Moderator: Nirvi Shah, Managing Editor, POLITICO*  
*Panelists: Felicia Cummings Smith, former Associate Commissioner, Kentucky Department of Education  
David Adkisson, President & CEO, Kentucky Chamber of Commerce*

Felicia Cummings Smith, former Associate Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Education, began the session with a description of Kentucky’s journey as the first state to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). At the onset of the adoption, “we had to get real with the community, our parents and ourselves about the things that were not working,” said Smith. By assessing their needs and then creating a robust plan to communicate the direction they were headed to all involved stakeholders, the state set itself up for success with the implementation of the new standards.

Smith discussed the state’s partnerships with coalition advisory committees, state organizations, the Kentucky Education Association, local colleges and universities, a local public television station, and local business and community groups as a key to their success. “Building trust and relationships with these community stakeholders was essential,” said Smith.

She also highlighted the importance of creating a central message, providing ongoing professional development for teachers, and receiving a commitment from every school board in the state to meet the college and career standards to their success.

David Adkisson, president and CEO of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, then discussed the Chamber’s partnership with the state and the importance of involving local businesses in the ongoing conversation. As part of the partnership, Adkisson highlighted the Chamber’s commitment to sending 58 school principals to executive level leadership training, matching business sponsors to building leaders to cover the associated costs. He also emphasized the Chamber’s travel across the state with education leaders to promote the new standards, production of informative videos on the CCSS, publication of op-eds, and more.

Through these presentations and the Q & A that followed, attendees learned how Kentucky’s communication with its stakeholders and collaborative partnerships were foundational to not only successfully implementing the CCSS, but also in conveying to the community their impact in improving student achievement.

**Addressing Communications Challenge for Common Core Implementation**  
*Moderator: Nora Carr, President, NSPRA, & Chief of Staff, Guilford County Public Schools (NC)  
Panelists: Dayna Richardson, Chair, Kansas LFA  
Terri Hodge, President, Delaware PTA  
Mel Riddile, Associate Director, High School Services, NASSP  
Anne Byrne, President, NSBA & School Board Member, Nanuet Union Free District (NY)*

During this session, the panelists discussed their unique perspectives on the CCSS implementation. This included both positive and negative experiences with implementation, lessons learned, and what can be done to ensure future success. Representatives from Kansas and Delaware spoke of their successes in implementing the CCSS. As part of those
successes, the organizations that each represents created materials for their members which educated them about the new standards and communicated to them what they entail and why they are important.

In comparison to the success of these states, as well as Kentucky, Anne Byrne discussed the struggles New York experienced with their implementation of the CCSS. She cited how a lack of communication, preparation, and resources led to a “disaster.” Despite this, Byrne was optimistic about the future success of the standards and their impact on student achievement, with educators and school boards now starting to experience positive outcomes in New York.

Recurring themes throughout the session, and throughout the entire Leadership Council Meeting, included the need for ongoing communication with stakeholders – teachers, parents, community members and more, as well as receiving buy-in from all groups involved and creating concrete, concise messaging.