

## HOMING IN: PHILANTHROPIES WITH A SINGULAR FOCUS



**1)** On the banks of the Willamette River in Eugene last fall, Wallace Foundation President Christine DeVita (far left) and Education Director Richard Laine (far right) met to talk about Oregon's educational leadership with Oregon Department of Education's Rob Larson (second from left) and Eugene Superintendent George Russell. (Photo by Denise Jarrett Weeks)

**2)** Quoting Edmund Burke, Eugene Superintendent George Russell expresses his urgency to close the achievement gap for students of color: "The equal treatment of unequals is the greatest injustice of all." Russell's district is one of only 12 around the nation to be chosen by the Wallace Foundation for its Leadership Initiative. (Photo courtesy of Eugene School District 4J)

# TRAINING ITS SIGHTS ON LEADERSHIP: The Wallace Foundation

By Bracken Reed

**EUGENE, Oregon**—Strong leadership, a unified vision, clearly defined goals, and resources focused like a laser beam on achieving these goals—research has shown these to be key to organizational success.

Schools, districts, and state education departments are being urged to follow this recipe by focusing all of their energy and resources on the single issue of student achievement, or face dire consequences.

But what about the organizations that serve them? Can the still-gaping achievement gap be partly attributed to those organizations, public and private, nonprofit and for-profit, that seek to help public schools? Have their efforts been too piecemeal and unfocused to provide lasting or fundamental help?

The Wallace Foundation, a New York-based national philanthropy with a long record of support for school reform, has narrowed its focus in recent years, creating a powerful model of philanthropy. In 1999, the foundation conducted a rigorous self-evaluation of its education reform efforts. Between 1988 and 1999, it had invested more than \$400 million on a range of K–12 initiatives, including improving the quality of teaching, school counseling, school libraries, and high school vocational programs. The results of these efforts, while positive, were nonetheless limited in their benefits.

According to Richard Laine, director of education for the Wallace Foundation, the organization was also undergoing a fundamental change in philosophy. “Like many foundations,” he says, “we were moving from a question of ‘have we moved  $x$  amount of dollars?’ to a realization that it’s not about the amount of money; it’s about the kind of impact you are having. Funding alone is rarely the answer.”

## A NEW APPROACH: LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

What was needed, the foundation realized, was a new approach—one that focused on a crucial element of school reform, while also addressing the systemic context in which schools exist. The common issue at all levels, largely missing from prior reform efforts, was the role of leadership in ensuring student success.

Wallace’s Education Leadership Initiative, launched in 2000, is a multifaceted, interrelated strategy involving districts, states, and a broad coalition of organizations from every layer of the education system. Unlike past initiatives, this emphasis on improving leadership at all levels of education goes beyond a classroom-by-classroom or school-by-school approach, and instead acknowledges the enormous influence that district- and state-level policies have on student

achievement.

The core of the initiative is the development of state-district demonstration sites across the country, each of which is working on four major goals:

- Developing leaders with the skills and ability to improve student learning
- Creating the working conditions and incentives needed to enable those leaders to improve learning for all kids
- Ensuring that policies and programs, practices and budgets—from states down to classrooms—are coordinated in ways that connect leadership to meeting high expectations for every child
- Building national partnerships and rallying public support so that the innovative ideas and practices being developed in the state-district demonstration sites can influence education systems across the country

In short, the foundation recognized that placing good leaders in problematic systems would not work. While improving leaders’ preparation and performance is essential, states and districts must also address the conditions and environment within which principals, superintendents, and other school leaders work.

In an era of increased accountability, combined with severe budget cuts, school and district administrators are under greater pressure than

ever before to produce results. At the same time, policies and practices at the state level are rarely aligned with those at the district level. As Laine says, “It’s really difficult to be a leader when you have two separate accountability systems (state and district) that are running you in different directions.”

To make matters worse, professional training programs are often inconsistent and inadequate, failing to prepare administrators for the high-pressure, politically charged realities of the job.

Given these difficulties, it’s not surprising that districts, especially in high-poverty urban areas, have a hard time attracting and retaining quality candidates. As recent research funded by Wallace has documented, the critical issue is not a shortage of principal candidates, but providing adequate, real-world professional training while improving the conditions in which administrators work.

## TAKING THE LEAD IN OREGON

In 2001, the Wallace Foundation launched a three-year, \$8.9 million State Action for Education Leadership Project (SAELP). Through a competitive grant process, 15 states were selected as project demonstration sites whose goal was to develop state policies and practices that are more supportive of district and

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**26** school leadership. SAELP also featured a consortium of five national education organizations, led by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), charged with coordinating and supporting the work of the SAELP states.

A year later, Wallace launched Leadership for Educational Achievement in Districts (LEAD), the district component of its state-district demonstration site strategy. Each of the 12 LEAD districts is located within, and linked to, a SAELP state. Taken together, the goal is to ensure that state leadership policies and district practices are closely coordinated in ways that enable leaders to support learning.

Oregon is the only state west of the Mississippi participating in both SAELP and LEAD. According to George Russell, superintendent of Eugene School District 4J, the grant application itself was transforming. The district worked closely with the state's SAELP team, led by Rob Larson, director of policy and research for the Oregon Department of Education. In addition, SAELP includes representatives from nearly every major educational organization in the state, including the Oregon School Boards Association, the Oregon Education Association, the Oregon Business Council, the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission, the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, the state su-

perintendent's office, the governor's office, the Oregon legislature, the state university system, and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

"Because so many constituents were involved in the grant-writing process," says Eugene's Assistant Superintendent Tom Henry, "we've had tremendous buy-in from the very beginning."

What resulted from the state and district grant proposals were three objectives:

- Strengthen the pool of principal and superintendent candidates, especially minority candidates, both in district 4J and statewide
- Strengthen the leadership capabilities of existing administrators
- Improve the conditions in which these administrators work

In the past year, both teams have made progress in meeting their objectives. Along with its neighbor, the University of Oregon, district 4J has created a principal preparation program that draws faculty from both the district and university. In its first term, it recruited 28 teachers to participate, including 14 women and four minority candidates.

The district is building leadership capacity at the school level by encouraging principals to identify teacher leaders. It is also in the process of developing a mentoring program for potential administrators.

Both the state and district teams have worked closely with the seven major administrative licensure programs in the state to align their requirements with national standards and to remove barriers that have inhibited potential candidates.

### NEED FOR MORE MINORITY LEADERS

The Northwest's student population grows more diverse every day. It's increasingly important to foster the professional development of minority educators. School leadership needs to better represent the demographics of the region's school children.

"This project has really put a light on that issue for us," says Rob Larson. "When we looked at the data, we found that we had a great disparity between the percentage of students who are diverse as compared to school leaders who are diverse." Nearly 22 percent of Oregon's students are ethnic minorities, compared to 4 percent of its administrative workforce, he says: "We're going to work hard to change that [imbalance]."

The Wallace Foundation's two-pronged Leadership Initiative seeks to nurture successful and promising school leaders—particularly minorities. George Russell, Eugene's superintendent, is one of the handful of superintendents around the nation to be tapped by the foundation to lead school districts participating in the initiative.

An education administrator for 25 years, Russell, who is African American, was director of human resources for Eugene's 4J school district when, in 1998, Superintendent Margaret Nichols died of cancer.

Promoted to the superintendent position, Russell faced the myriad and challenging demands of guiding a district with too few resources and too many policies that worked against his best efforts.

The Wallace Foundation's Leadership Initiative is working to improve such conditions for leaders in its 12 district demonstration sites. In addition to other professional learning opportunities, Russell and the other LEAD superintendents from

## CONSIDER THIS

The work of the Wallace Foundation is one example of how a private, nonprofit organization can significantly alter the public dialogue about an important educational issue. While by all accounts their work has had a positive influence, it does raise the issue of how much influence private organizations can and should have on the public education system.

Joanne Erickson, assistant professor of educational leadership at Montana State University is well acquainted with this issue. As the architect of Montana's successful SAELP grant, Erickson has had firsthand, positive experience in dealing with the Wallace Foundation. But with nearly 30 years of experience at all levels of the public education system, Erickson has a balanced and realistic view of the role that nonprofit organizations can play.

"Anytime you take money, whether federal or nonprofit, there are strings attached," says Erickson. "You need to be very careful to not just chase after dollars, but to make sure their goals align with yours.

"In that way," she adds, "those nonprofit relationships are not dissimilar to our relationship with the federal government. And generally speaking, I'd rather deal with a private organization than deal with the federal government, which often has unrealistic reporting requirements that can get in the way of progress."

Montana's SAELP grant has been an exceptionally positive experience, Erickson is quick to add: "Our state has enjoyed our relationship with the Wallace Foundation. Philosophically, we're aligned with them. They offered research to grant applicants that gave us a good idea of where they were coming from. If we had been philosophically opposed to the ISLLC [Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium] Standards, then we might not have been a good match for this grant. It's important to look at those kind of issues before you jump in."

To learn more about the Wallace Foundation and its Leadership Initiative, visit the Web site, [www.wallacefunds.org](http://www.wallacefunds.org).

around the nation are periodically attending training sessions at Harvard's Center for Public Leadership in the Kennedy School of Government. The center, funded by the Wallace Foundation, brings students, scholars, and practitioners together to examine excellence in leadership education and research, with the aim of bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Taking the podium last fall at a Wallace Foundation conference in Eugene, Russell said, "We are a district in transition. We are growing more diverse every day. Today, 17 percent of our students are students of color." But with an open-enrollment policy, 20 alternative schools, and three charter schools, the achievement gap is wide between the district's privileged and poor, between white kids and students of color, he said.

With Wallace's help, the district and the state of Oregon are developing systems that enable them to collect and disaggregate student data. And the data, Russell told the audience, are revealing that "students with a particular background are behind those students of privilege." Therefore, differentiated opportunities for students are essential if the achievement gap is to be closed, he said, quoting Edmund Burke: "The equal treatment of unequals is the greatest injustice of all."

## ENVISIONING ENDURING CHANGE

The partnership between Oregon's SAELP and LEAD teams is a key part of Wallace's strategy. The importance of leadership in improving student learning has gained a wide profile throughout the state. Key projects have been developed that are having a direct influence on the recruitment and retention of quality administrators, and a network of strong relationships has been developed that will last far beyond the life of the grant.

By concentrating on leadership, with an interrelated, broad-based set of strategies, the foundation has been able to make a difference in a way that is both deep and wide. The Leadership Initiative has begun to influence the national dialogue on school reform, and could eventually have a significant effect on the policies and practices of states and districts across the country. And beyond this particular project, Wallace's innovative approach to education reform can serve as a model that schools, districts, states, and other nonprofit organizations can follow to create systemic, sustainable change. ■