

# Distributive Leadership in District Reform

## A Model for Taking Linked Learning to Scale

### ◆ Knowledge Brief ◆

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Richard Elmore (2000) argues that the problem of scaling up school improvement, whether it is in a school or a school system, is one of capacity building and specialization. Building a broad base of capacity is not possible if control is limited to a few individuals. The solution, he argues, is the *broader distribution of leadership*.

— John DeFlaminis, Penn Center for Leadership

**S**tories of successful education reform are almost as abundant as stories of failed education reform—and, sadly, they're often connected. It's a familiar scenario: reform is born through a powerful champion, the champion moves on, the reform effort dies.

Successful reform *can* go beyond a single classroom or school, and outlast an individual. Successful, ongoing reform initiatives exist and they are supported by some key attributes—chief among them is the practice of distributive leadership. This brief describes distributive leadership, shares an example of a California district using this practice to implement reform, surfaces potential challenges, and offers questions to consider.

### The Case for Distributive Leadership

As Elmore (2000) asserts, a strong plan, even with well thought-out curricular strategies and a bold leader, will not succeed, much less go to scale, if leadership is limited to a few individuals. Both the quality of the change and its ability to endure have proven to be tenuous; but reforms have been successfully sustained through a model of distributive leadership. This model stands in stark contrast to traditional hierarchical approaches of decision-making, enlisting individuals throughout an organization, not simply those “at the top” (Bolden, 2008).

The model extends the responsibility for leadership beyond the individual and weaves it into the relationships and interactions of multiple stakeholders (Aller and Irons, 2009). Most importantly, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) suggest that this interconnected system of leadership has the potential for having a profound impact on student learning.

### Distributive Leadership: An Essential Practice for Linked Learning

Rather than an “initiative-of-the-month” approach, distributive leadership enables districts to build in structures, capacity, and culture that foster systemic change owned and sustained by a broad base of leaders. Distributive leadership practices are being applied through the California District Initiative for Linked Learning. This initiative, launched by the James Irvine Foundation in 2008, supports 11 California school districts to plan or implement the Linked Learning approach (formerly known as “multiple pathways”) in their high schools. Each district is developing a systemic approach to Linked Learning pathways to prepare all students for success in college and career.

### Applying Distributive Leadership to the Central Office

The central office plays a vital role in sustaining reform. Linda Darling-Hammond (2005) comments, “Much reform in U. S. schools has been an add-on enterprise. Although many change initiatives begin with a focus on how schools should change, few have considered how central-office operations, district resource allocations, and management structures must also change.”

An important component of the Linked Learning Initiative is a District Leadership Development Series, featuring residencies hosted by a participating district. During a 2009 District Leadership Residency facilitated by the School Redesign Network at Stanford University and ConnectEd, The California Center for College and Career, Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) introduced network participants to their efforts to plan, implement, and sustain their district reform through a distributive leadership model applied across many levels.

LBUSD approached the reform from both a “top-down” and “bottom-up” perspective, based on evidence that shows successful reform incorporates voices and leadership from all levels. This is modeled by the district

administration itself, as the traditional hierarchy within the district office is deemphasized in favor of a more distributed, inclusive model that includes the following key staffing components:

**District point person:** A Project Director for Smaller Learning Communities and Expanding Pathways is responsible for LBUSD's participation in the Linked Learning Initiative and is the district "go-to" person.

**Extended Implementation Team:** This team works closely with the project director to implement the initiative. Members include academic and career technical education curriculum leaders, the work-based learning coordinator, and a research analyst. This collaboration expands overall ownership for this initiative, ensures alignment of key components, and provides regular, collective thinking regarding the direction of the reform.

**Executive Team:** This team includes members of the superintendent's cabinet and works with the project director to maintain alignment with this and other high-priority district initiatives.

## Extending Distributive Leadership to Schools

The Linked Learning Initiative provides an effective mechanism for including school staff in reform efforts through Pathway Leadership Teams. These teams are school-based and made up of site administrators, teachers, counselors, and others. These teams are critical in leading bold change to structures, policies, and instructional practices, such as master schedule, curriculum integration, and professional development.

Lieberman and Miller (2004) note the profound impact teacher leadership can have on the school culture, creating an environment that transforms a school into a learning community. To support such leadership in its schools, LBUSD has prioritized several elements, including:

**Formal leadership positions/structures:** Each school has a Small Learning Community (SLC) Coordinator who supports the Pathway Leadership Teams. In addition, each pathway has designated at least one lead teacher who facilitates the Pathway Leadership Teams.

**Authority, not just responsibility:** Though the overall framework and requirements for the Linked Learning Initiative have come from district leadership, schools

and pathway teams have significant autonomy around implementation at their schools.

**Principal capacity and leadership:** Principals, who play a critical role in the distributive leadership model, convene quarterly with district leaders. Principals then work with site-based instructional leadership teams to plan and implement aligned professional development for their staff.

**Teachers as leaders:** The shift to more formal leadership roles and responsibilities is not always easy for teachers who, Danielson (2007) notes, "...need opportunities to learn the necessary skills of curriculum planning, instructional improvement, assessment design, collaboration, and facilitation." LBUSD provides leadership training and support for pathway leadership team members so they can take the lead in building a site-based culture of collaboration and accountability.

## Involving the Broader Community

As a core component of this initiative, districts are charged with developing a broad-based community coalition to play a meaningful leadership role.

LBUSD has developed the Expanding Pathways Implementation Council—a formal steering committee comprised of school site curriculum leaders, postsecondary partners, Regional Occupation Programs and Career Technical Education leaders, principals, counselors, SLC coordinators, industry and community leaders, executive district staff, and others. A broad organizing body, the council meets monthly and takes on the following roles:

**Serve as liaisons to specialty groups:** Councilmembers communicate with key stakeholders and champion the initiative.

**Bring expertise/multiple perspectives to the conversation:** Councilmembers address such issues as sharing of resources, tapping expertise in the group, and considering the impact of their decisions on various constituencies

**Serve as a touchstone for accountability issues:** The council monitors the implementation of the Linked Learning Initiative and makes strategic recommendations for adjustments. The group also provides essential input on the quality indicators used to determine student career readiness.

**Align and focus resources:** The council coordinates recommendations for new course development, revision, and approval and assesses the need for new/revised board policies and administrative regulations.

meet regularly with lead teachers to ensure progress on the initiative, maintain consistent communication, and provide support.

## Maintaining Overall Alignment, Accountability, and Support

Fullan (2009) notes, “System-embedded learning is not just a matter of addressing leadership at the district level. It also requires coherence among all elements of the system, including curriculum, instruction, assessment, and intervention practices.” LBUSD has taken numerous steps to ensure alignment, accountability, and support at the various levels of distributive leadership, including:

**Employing regular communication between district leadership and SLC coordinators:** Each month, the district project director formally meets with SLC coordinators around a collaboratively developed agenda. During these forums, the director and a district SLC coach work with SLC Coordinators on shared concerns and build ownership around elements of the initiative.

**Empowering SLC coordinators:** Each SLC coordinator is charged with implementing SLCs, including Linked Learning pathways. Their responsibilities include aligning district-level professional development with schools site professional development. SLC coordinators

**Fostering direct links between district leadership and lead teachers:** Recognizing that direct communication between the district and school sites fosters cohesion, the project director convenes five institutes each year. These institutes provide teacher leaders an opportunity to work directly with district leadership.

## Surfacing Potential Challenges

While LBUSD has developed a strong model of distributive leadership to drive this initiative, leaders would also be the first to admit that it is a constant work in progress and not without challenges. Common struggles that surface around distributive leadership include the following:

**Lack of clarity on authority:** Districts need to be as transparent as possible around the actual decision-making power of various personnel in the leadership structure, e.g. whether a specific role or body is advisory or empowered to make key decisions. Lack of clarity on the level of empowerment and responsibility for various roles can impede the reform process.

**Difficulty in balancing autonomy and central vision:** Particularly in large districts, it is challenging to manage the confluence of efforts and decisions that are

## The Elements of Distributive Leadership at LBUSD

### District Level

- **Project Director for Smaller Learning Communities and Expanding Pathways.** The district point person who takes primary responsibility for LBUSD’s participation in the Linked Learning Initiative.
- **Extended Implementation Team.** Academic and career technical education curriculum leaders, work-based learning coordinator, and research analyst. Works closely with the project director.
- **Executive Team.** Members of the superintendent’s cabinet. Works with the project director to maintain alignment with high priority district initiatives.

### School Level

- **Pathway Leadership Teams.** School site administrators, teachers, counselors, and others. Lead the work to change their current structures, policies, and instructional practices to align with the district initiative. Connect with the central office system through the project director.
- **SLC coordinators.** Meet with district project director and a district SLC coach. Meet monthly to work on shared concerns and build ownership around the components of the initiative.

### Community Level

- **Expanding Pathways Implementation Council.** School curriculum leaders, postsecondary partners, ROP and CTE leaders, principals, counselors, SLC coordinators, community leaders, executive district staff, and others. Meets monthly to facilitate the implementation and expansion of the Linked Learning approach.

part of a distributive leadership structure. As school and pathway leaders are empowered to develop a program that caters to their own population, there remains a vital need for central oversight and a common district vision.

**Challenges in implementing actual change in cultures and systems:** Going from theory to practice is incredibly challenging within a distributive leadership structure. It requires many individuals who are accustomed to making decisions to largely let go of that exclusive authority. It requires organizations to rethink time, space, routines, and alignment of human resources to best support a more functional leadership and, thus, organizational structure.

## Making Lasting Transformations

Distributive leadership provides an avenue to empower essential team members in the initiative. This model also creates infrastructures that foster the sustainability often lacking in reform initiatives, minimizing the impact of the inevitable migration of individual champions within the school or district. However, Leverett (2002) framed this in a way that goes beyond simple pragmatism and focuses on the urgent impact on students:

We can continue status quo oriented leadership and management styles ... or we can commit to the development of school or district cultures that expand the base of leaders. The decisions we make as appointed leaders influence the depth of support within our organization for the challenging work of fostering equity. Leaders who grow equity warriors are leaders who are most likely to have the support needed to advance the important work of improving teaching and learning.

The Linked Learning Initiative is a powerful way to bring lasting transformation to classrooms and, through distributive leadership, to raise the number of “equity warriors” in schools, districts, and the community.

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## Questions to Consider

Whether or not districts are interested in shifting toward a more formal distributive leadership model, a few essential questions are relevant for all districts.

- What role is the district leadership team playing in strategically developing the leadership capacity of others at district and school levels?
- To what extent are site-based leadership teams, including teacher leaders, encouraged and provided sufficient autonomy to make important decisions?
- What benefits and/or challenges might surface if the district were to shift to a more distributive leadership model?

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