School Leadership Project

Summary Report

The School Leadership Project encompassed a year-long investigative effort into school and district leadership issues in Louisiana. This summary report includes: identified challenges and weaknesses, recommendations for next steps, and a spotlight on those already leading the way. The Wilson Foundation and the Foundation for A Better Louisiana provided, in part, project funding.

Report written by Stephanie Desselle (CABL)
Project leaders: Stephanie Desselle and Brigitte Nieland (LABI)
School Leadership Challenges...and Solutions for Louisiana

The School Leadership Project is an investigative effort focused on school and district leadership issues for public education. The project was conducted by the Council for A Better Louisiana (CABL) and the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI). Project leaders included Stephanie Desselle, Director of Education Policy with CABL and Brigitte Nieland, Vice President of Education Reform for LABI. The organizations thank the Wilson Foundation (Baton Rouge) for providing a grant to in support of the project.

This in-depth look at school leadership issues confirmed that Louisiana has varied and widespread challenges or weaknesses -- common knowledge to many. Most problems center on efforts, or lack thereof, to effectively recruit, identify, develop, and credential strong candidates; to provide professional support and training for current Superintendents and principals; and to retain effective school and district leaders.

What may not seem so obvious is that the state has some exceptional individuals and organizations that are engaged in strong programs and strategies. These efforts, along with a few new ideas, provide a framework for expanding the pool of strong candidates, improving current practices, and keeping good leaders in the field.

Furthermore, this project reinforced long-standing research and beliefs that effective leaders are critically important for having good schools and academic results for students.

2014 SUMMARY REPORT

Background: Louisiana’s major policy changes, significant funding increases, and a rigorous accountability system for public education in the past fifteen years have yielded real progress for students. Uneven implementation across districts and schools, however, has resulted in varied or incremental levels of improvement. In 2013, that left a quarter-million students below Louisiana’s minimum standard of knowledge and skills by grade, and over three-quarters of all students far below the national bar of proficiency. Though improving, over 148,000 students have dropped out of school in the past ten years. And, many graduates are underprepared for high-skilled career training or community, technical and baccalaureate-level courses – preventing many young citizens from getting good jobs and putting pressure on the growing demands in Louisiana’s diverse and expanding economy. (See CABL’s Louisiana Report Card on Major Education Indicators at www.cabl.org for more data.)

To accelerate progress, policymakers have ramped up efforts, including implementing a new teacher and principal evaluation system, integrating more rigorous learning standards and tests (i.e. Common Core, ACT, PARCC), and expanding school choice for at-risk students. Obviously, these policies have created a heightened demand for strong instructional leaders. And, if that weren’t enough, recent laws, based on best management and governance practices, now give superintendents and principals full responsibility and autonomy for the hiring, evaluation, compensation, dismissal, retention, and development of personnel and faculty. At the risk of stating the obvious, this rapid, substantive change means effective leadership is even more imperative for student success. But, while some leaders adapt, excel, and have support, some are unprepared or struggle without help, and others keep doing the same. Meanwhile, retirements seem to be on the rise and many officials cite a dwindling pool of strong leadership candidates or the type of candidates they need.

What We Hoped to Achieve and How: A small group of policy and NGO partners, with input from interested BESE members, discussed these issues and explored ways to attain better information and identify potential action steps. We quickly understood that we did not have the resources or time to conduct a massive statewide project. CABL and LABI agreed to take the lead on a strategic, limited project which aimed to:

- Shed some light on the scope and nature of current challenges,
- Highlight effective practices and programs in the state that can be shared, expanded or replicated
- Identify recommendations and ‘next steps;’ act on opportunities if presented, and
- Share key findings with policymakers, officials, foundations and professional/policy groups.
Though we learned a great deal, the project leaders are not experts in educational leadership. We relied on the professionals we interviewed for expertise. We simply investigated with intent in order to gather important information and ideas, and to assemble what we learned for use by policymakers, officials, educational groups and associations, school and district leaders, and others. General activities of the project included conducting in-depth interviews, focus-group type meetings, and connecting people on ideas. We also collaborated with certain organizations on designing and analyzing surveys of their members on school leadership issues. Many leaders, stakeholders and experts from public education, professional groups, statewide/regional policy organizations, independent programs, and school innovation initiatives graciously shared their time. They provided frank assessments, keen insights and valuable examples of what works. It should be noted that this project was limited in scope and therefore, the summary report reflects input from those who could be reached and agreed to participate. Nevertheless, a strategic approach yielded important information and substantive ideas. The observations and recommendations listed herein may not be shared by everyone we interviewed or surveyed, but they do represent commonalities, shared experiences, and a short but strong list of possible action steps for the future. Beyond this report, the partners continue to engage in advancing solutions where possible.

**Observations about School Leadership and the Challenges in Louisiana**

**Local School Systems**

1. Leadership begins at the top. Effective Superintendents and central office staff serve as change agents, consistently reflect a vision and mission based on excellence and foster good leaders and decision-making teams in schools. In describing attributes and strategies necessary to educational success, strong leaders always mention: high expectations without accepting mediocrity or excuses, communicating (at all levels) a clear vision, mission and priorities for improved student achievement, making decisions that are always aimed at meeting goals for teachers and students, constant evaluation of plans and implementation with revisions and adjustments as needed, creating a culture of guidance with support and incentives, and being unafraid to make difficult changes that are in the best interests of children. Our strong leaders demonstrate that success can happen, that it’s not just a dream.

2. Local districts that are effective in talent development have a philosophy of strong leadership that permeates all aspects of the system — superintendent, central office, principals and faculties. In these districts, strong teacher leaders are tapped and developed into school and district leadership positions — not by chance. Leadership is shared and evident at all levels. Unfortunately, many principals informed us that their districts often lack good candidate selection processes, recruiting and hiring practices, and incentives for performance. The reverse means that effective superintendents and district teams use strong interview techniques, professional screening tools, leadership training, higher pay, high-level training in other regions, and other incentives to select and keep their best leaders.

3. Superintendents often inherit central office personnel regardless of their leadership skills, competencies or vision. In these instances, some Superintendents may lack the know-how, be thwarted (board interference, tenure, etc.) or simply not be afforded the resources necessary to put together a team that wants to and can lead positive change that benefits faculties and students. Act 1 of 2012 was designed to remedy some of these issues by giving primary autonomy and responsibility for personnel decisions to Superintendents and
principals, but some simply do not take advantage of this or are prevented in doing so by entrenched interests.

4. Conversely, there is a cadre of local district office leaders from around the state who are exceptional professional, leading the way on critical issues in Louisiana. These leaders should be supported, rewarded, and given the freedom to continue to provide leadership at expanded levels beyond their own local district. They are providing much needed expertise and sharing practical know-how to other central office administrators, principals and teachers.

5. Superintendents often have to overcome long-established obstacles and resistance to school-based changes needed to help faculties reach higher levels of instruction and student achievement. Despite this, effective superintendents often institute shared leadership processes or programs at the school level in order to build momentum, share responsibility, and allow leaders to emerge while making improvements in instruction for students. They make changes in principals when necessary. They continue to press on implementing a vision based on excellence and they execute with support and development – job-embedded “learn and practice” every day. They build trust and pride so that educators in the schools own the vision and change. District leaders who achieve despite obstacles communicate at all levels and build strong networks, both within and without the system. There is an attitude of “Do what’s best for the students and let the chips fall where they may.”

6. Many districts lack knowledge of, access to, or funding for re-training or leadership development programs for system office staff to help lead and sustain positive change. Many teachers and principals report bad management practices and a lack of various competencies in central offices. Central office personnel too often engage in monitoring, dictates, or regulation rather than being strong leadership partners with schools.

7. Many Superintendents do not have access to, can’t afford, or simply do not take advantage of leadership training for themselves. Superintendents do not have access to collegial, effective leadership programs or activities in Louisiana or out, that provide them with a network of peers who are leading positive change. Successful Superintendents may be interested in activities among like-minded peers to exchange ideas, leadership experiences, and make site visits. There is no real recognition of rising stars and little professional, high-level “fellowships” or other pathways to help them continue to grow and succeed.

8. Good school boards can be powerful catalysts for change by insisting on and hiring proven leaders that meet the needs of the particular students and schools in their districts; staying out of personnel, management and operations; and holding the “CEO” accountable for clear and measurable academic results. Unfortunately, in some districts in Louisiana, school board members continue to block or otherwise unduly influence personnel and operational decisions. When this does happen, good boards “police” themselves, but unfortunately, others simply look away.

9. Some district bureaucracies are broken or are so entrenched that it would be extremely difficult to bring about needed change. They can also be subject to vacillation in administrative and political agendas that put any positive change in constant jeopardy. Outside, independent influences and leadership development initiatives with a track record (or that hold much promise) are needed in many regions...not only to build and demonstrate success, but to help sustain leadership development and feed good leaders into all aspects of education in the community or region.
10. Many rural districts have an extremely limited pool of school leader candidates or have difficulty in recruiting good candidates from without...whether for traditional or charter public schools.

11. The state Recovery School District is critical not just for the obvious purpose to turn around chronically low-performing schools, but as a large-scale example of how decentralization with autonomous principals and schools can and do work for improved student achievement – even in the most challenging of circumstances.

12. The State Department of Education Regional Network efforts, while offering excellent support with strong leaders, may be spread too thin in some geographical areas.

Credentials/Preparation
Please note that while the following information led to a couple of recommendations, the post-secondary role in preparing K-12 school leaders covers a large set of issues that were not part of the project scope. We did not interview college deans or officials and the project was not designed to gauge the effectiveness of college degree programs, nor catalog any college-based leadership programs. However, common concerns repeatedly surfaced during our many discussions. Whether based on perceptions or reality, the seriousness of these concerns and what’s at stake seem to represent a clear need for full discussions among officials, policymakers, educators, administrators, civic leaders, etc.

1. There was general acknowledgement that undergraduate teacher preparation programs have been improving at most campuses. But with regard to graduate educational leadership programs, it was frequently mentioned that they could improve to better meet the real-world needs of leaders in district offices and schools. College and university educational leadership programs seem to need more scrutiny with real, transparent accountability based on meaningful factors and results. With few exceptions and to varying degrees, colleges and universities were described as somewhat “disconnected” from PK-12 schools and schooling. In addition, colleges, Regents, BESE and K-12 educators are seen as needing to come together to act on educational leadership issues.

2. There was also a strong call for better standards for educational leadership degrees and licensure. The “pipeline” of school leader candidates with educational leadership degrees was often described as “wanting.” There seems to be no doubt that educators with strong leadership potential obtain these degrees, but so do others who may not, or who are not adequately prepared for the role. There may be an issue of quantity vs. quality.

3. Educational leadership programs and degrees from Louisiana regional colleges and universities are seen as widely varying in quality. Concerns and observations about mediocrity and relevance spanned various aspects from course content to the entrance requirements of those seeking the degree to the lasting benefits should the recipient wait many years before applying to be a principal or assistant principal. Southeastern University, LSU, and Northwestern University, however, were often mentioned as having quality programs.

Developing Potential School Leaders - The “Pipeline”
1. The occurrence or number of local school systems that have comprehensive, strong tools or practices to screen, tap and develop talented candidates for positions as principals or central office staff appears to be “few” and is described as “rare” in Louisiana. Many districts simply lack the know-how, desire, or resources to develop their own high-quality leadership development programs even though it’s important to identify and create opportunities for educators with proven potential. But, there are some districts leading the way and can serve as strong examples to others.
2. Both local school districts and charter school management groups say that they are most effective when they can develop or grow their own leaders from within, and/or have a pipeline of good candidates ready and willing. But, that is not always possible, so strong recruiting strategies, hiring processes, and even incentives are paramount for getting good leaders into Louisiana schools (whether from out-of-state or within).

3. Most teachers say there are few, or simply do not know of any efforts in their local districts to tap and develop teachers with strong potential for roles as assistant principal and principal. (See A+PEL School Leadership Issues Survey: http://www.apeleducators.org/apel-releases-leadership-survey-results/). A review of a random sample (#35) of school district websites showed very few had available information about leadership development opportunities in their districts.

4. In some local districts where a process of some sort exists for leadership development, the approach seems to be more of a voluntary “open call” program with criteria that are important, but do not necessarily tap good educators with strong potential. Other districts may use very informal methods that are not possible to judge in term of quality or results. In some places, “who you know” still seems to be the norm for assistant principal or principal selection. Many districts lack professional, valid selection methods/tools that identify/screen candidates based on demonstrated ability and leadership traits, not just seniority.

5. It may be several years between receiving an educational leadership degree and license and applying or being hired as a principal. This may create a potential gap in up-to-date knowledge or skills. There are no renewal requirements if many years have passed since initial licensing – as is required for many other professions. Without this, induction programs for new principals become even more important.

6. For a host of reasons – budget cuts, bureaucratic pace, not a priority, missing expertise or staffing – local school systems, colleges or state agencies are not always the right entity to meet urgent, cross-discipline (leadership potential, knowledge, traits, skills) or regional needs in training, development and mentoring of good candidates or current principals.

**Development/Support of Current School Leaders**

1. Decision-making at the school level is the primary condition needed for good leaders to succeed. School districts must create an environment of school-based autonomy with accountability for results and rewards for those who make a positive difference. Unfortunately, many schools and districts do not employ collaborative or shared leadership concepts that help build a professional culture and climate for principals and faculties to succeed.

2. Principals in many instances have been suppressed as instructional leaders. This leaves them not knowing how to use the tools they already have, how to move students up academically, nor how to ask “why” or the right questions. They may lack experience with diagnosing school problems, strategic planning and executing change. But, if given the right knowledge and practices with the support, authority and freedom to implement them, many can begin to help improve instructional and school success for students.

3. Many principals are experiencing great difficulties in implementing major new programs all at the same time, particularly the COMPASS evaluation system, new high school testing (ACT) and the integration of the Common Core State Standards. In many, many districts, there is urgent need for high-quality professional development, not by the state, but...
via other avenues that can be pursued quickly in regions where principals have not been given good training and knowledge from their districts.

4. Many principals and other school leaders are not adequately prepared on a wide variety of management skills, such as resolving conflicts, building teams, coaching/motivating and empowering teachers, personnel evaluation, communications, and other areas aimed at leading faculties with positive results. Time management is a serious problem for many school leaders.

5. Unfortunately, many local school districts are failing to deliver directly or provide access to strong, research-based leadership training and high-quality professional development for current principals and assistant principals (funding, low priority, lack of expertise, don’t know where to get it). Many districts just depend on the school to figure it out and it may be a case of “not knowing what you don’t know.”

6. The quality of induction programs for new principals is described as “not real” or “just on paper” in some districts.

7. There are on-going issues around sustainability when moving to independent management of schools. Use of monetary incentives and higher salaries to hire strong leaders or reward and retain high-performing ones is a strategy often employed by public charter schools/management groups and by those organizations that incubate new schools. They are not commonly used, however, in traditional school systems in Louisiana.

8. The state principal evaluation system is not being implemented with rigor and fidelity in some places. There are significant gaps (district-to-district) in applying standards.

9. Assistant principals are often assigned to a very specialized role and may not necessarily be getting all the right experiences in order to later be good principals. This is not a negative concern, but an acknowledgement of a more and more common condition. Its impact on the “pipeline” needs to be examined.

10. Fewer assistant principals are showing interest in moving up to the job of principal. They see the challenges and expectations, but the pay scale may not be differentiated enough to take on the added responsibilities and scrutiny, especially if there is a lack of district support or development offerings, and lack of autonomy in faculty decisions.

11. Statewide professional associations heretofore have not been seen as intensely engaged in facilitating or providing high-quality professional development around urgent and specific needs or in first-rate leadership training or networks. This seems to be changing (Louisiana Association of Principals).

**Recommendations, Next Steps**

Given the rapid pace in change in education policy and expectations from schools on behalf of students, Louisiana can and should be at the forefront in the U.S. on school leadership issues. Perhaps more awareness, a sense of urgency, and an assembling of creative minds and community interests can help spur more action. There are many approaches, not necessarily led or implemented by state government or boards. Some actions are needed right

There is great need and urgency in Louisiana, but this is also a time of creativity, innovation, nimbleness and collaboration. Any forward-thinking leader, district or organization in education can start with a focused effort to improve school leadership and then “leverage any small points of change.”
away and many districts need systemic shifts, but there’s no reason to wait. **It appears to be mostly a matter of will.** Several state policies are supporting a culture of change, leadership and innovation in Louisiana right now. Many in public education are already using good leadership techniques, practices, and programs with resulting success.

*For many of the recommendations below:* regional and local efforts can be initiated and/or delivered by foundations, NGOs, professional organizations, universities, school creators and innovators, and others with expertise or an entrepreneurial spirit. Some local public school systems and their leaders are role models and can demonstrate to other districts how to create and implement some of the suggestions below. Partnerships among local districts, outside organizations or institutions, and the philanthropic community can come together quickly to meet needs and sustain long-term change. The wheel does not need to be re-invented and there are many outside groups, research and programs that can help public school systems in this arena. These recommendations represent diverse approaches and will create synergy, bring more people into implementing solutions, scale-up efforts and support sustainability.

---

**SHORT TERM –

--**Louisiana needs high-quality leadership development and training for Superintendents** based on excellence and designed to help district leaders achieve system-wide results for students. This type of focused effort should be developed and offered through an NGO or NGO partnership (university, national leadership organizations, consulting, etc.) utilizing expertise from Superintendents who have proven successes for students. While state funding grants or fee-for-service format with local and state funds would be appropriate, having a nonprofit rather than agency program approach would allow for freedom and flexibility to design the highest quality program, be able to respond quickly to changing conditions and needs, and utilize the best leaders regardless of any geographic or other factors. A multi-faceted leadership program of this nature could provide valuable and practical know-how for both Superintendents and principals or central office leaders who are ready to take the next step. Similarly, this type of initiative could yield a high-level peer network for Superintendents and rising stars who are demonstrating success, leading change and sustaining progress as evidenced by substantive academic improvement for students.

-- **Every district should have some type of in-house, strong screening/selection process to tap (school-leader, principal) candidates** with strong leadership potential and provide customized training/development to prepare them for future roles. Districts that do not do so now should quickly work to utilize good techniques, programs, tools, fellowships, or other training techniques and programs that are widely available and/or in practice in the state and otherwise.

-- **Louisiana should create a leadership clearinghouse or exchange (web-based) to recruit talent into the state, to offer incentives, and to be a lead voice to attract high quality leaders.** This could be a unique and grand opportunity for Louisiana to tell its story and to promote opportunities that will make a difference. An expansive interactive site could include position openings, leadership training opportunities, and incentives from specific systems or schools. Membership or posting fees could be utilized to support the site and effort.
-- **Foundation and corporate partnerships** should be encouraged to help improve local recruiting efforts (expertise, marketing, tools), to directly participate in encouraging good candidates, and to help in rewarding those that perform well.

-- **For strong school leader candidates, master teachers or instructional specialists, new principals, and veterans, all local systems should provide more pay and other monetary incentive or rewards if they perform well** and continue to take on ever increasing levels of responsibilities. Other incentives could include travel expenses and pay to participate in peer training, fellowships or exchanges in other states or at national venues or even high-tech tools. An uncommon example comes from East Feliciana Parish that now offers incentives for teacher leaders to obtain their master’s degree from LSU. More pay and other incentives should NOT be volunteer activities, but rather limited, rigorous, objective selection and participation that recognizes and rewards the district’s most effective leaders. The state should explore ways to oversee and fund one or two aspects of this (i.e. fellowships). In addition, pay levels for principals should be different enough to be an incentive for good assistant principals, master or specialist teachers to want to move up and take on the challenges. “Pay your best people more and let them succeed.”

-- **Districts must institute more rigorous and meaningful new principal induction programs** with a true mentoring period. There are several models and much research on excellent induction programs and a wide variety of district funds can be used for this. Louisiana has fine examples in other districts that can be replicated or through help and guidance solicited from entities such as the School Leadership Center of New Orleans.

-- **Districts should provide (in-house or out) customized, high-quality professional development for principals** on various aspects of school leadership and change (planning, instructional quality, data, managing adult issues, evaluations and coaching, leading and building teams, etc. through in-house, job-embedded processes and programs based on best practices. If they are not able to fully provide this in-house, then other means should be quickly explored and utilized: exchanges/site visits with other districts in Louisiana; on-the-job mentoring by high performing retired professionals and resident exchanges; customized programs by state and national professional associations, nonprofit and university centers; and by partnering with outside groups in the community or state. Training around Common Core, teacher evaluation, school diagnostics, instructional leadership, and building teams is paramount at this time. The state department of education or some other entity could catalog and provide a guide on high-quality local/regional/national resources, best practices and program offerings.

-- **Create or expand existing independent school leadership centers or programs that are based on the best practices and offerings in the nation.** Regional/community-based NGOs, foundations, professional associations, school innovation groups, and other entities should lead these efforts to incubate, support and/or directly provide services or programs that focus on improving current school leaders, recruitment, and screening and preparing strong candidates for traditional public schools, public charters, specialized or new types of schools, and even nonpublic schools. Some examples of these efforts are at work in Louisiana and several national or out-of-state efforts do engage in local initiatives. Depending on interest and demonstrated expertise, some state universities and colleges would be assets to this type of endeavor. These efforts should be tailored to local needs and enlist expertise (for initial design, start-up and implementation) from anywhere it can be found, not just within one’s own backyard. Depending on needs in the region, the
scope could be comprehensive (School Leadership Center of New Orleans) or strategic (parts of SLC, New School New Orleans, New School Baton Rouge and RELAY, Louisiana Association of Principals and Breaking Ranks). These independent endeavors should take advantage of opportunities to raise community awareness and expectations (what does excellence look like?) and facilitate partnerships. While initial planning, design and start-up could be supported by private and foundation sources, these efforts should become primarily funded on a fee-for-service basis. The goal is to find and recruit strong leaders, improve current practices, and build a strong pipeline in each region. It’s important that communities create and support a variety of approaches to having strong educational leaders so that risks are minimized, critical to long-term sustainability, and regardless of changes in people on political boards and in district offices.

-- Professional associations in the state should expand their active leadership role and entrepreneurial approach to 1) help demonstrate or deliver more high-quality programs, services and networks that meet urgent and long-term needs of current principals, central office staff and superintendents – alone or in partnership with NGOs, universities, school innovators, or initiatives in-state and around the country, 2) become the prime clearinghouse (web-based and consultants) in Louisiana for all types (nonprofit, public, college-based, private) programs, resources, research, partnerships, etc., here and elsewhere and 3) facilitate and connect local districts/school leaders in need with effective leaders and excellent programs already at work in Louisiana and the nation...not in general conferences, but directed at specific efforts to improve leadership recruitment, hiring and development practices and programs in a district. It is also recommended that for principals and Superintendents, a statewide survey by their associations would be beneficial on honing in on critical issues and needs, while providing a forum for varied perspectives and/or solutions. It has also been suggested there is a need for a cohort of principal coaches within the state.

-- A larger portion of 8G funding (grants) in the category for pilots, R&D, etc. should be designated for advancing high-quality, innovative or collaborative leadership development initiatives in the state.

LONGER TERM –

-- Higher education and PK-12 need to get back to the table, similar to the state’s previous “Blue Ribbon Commission,” with an eye toward practical solutions that will improve or increase the pool of strong school leadership candidates (as principals or administrators). The Board of Regents and BESE should convene a high-level group (with a timeframe) to discuss, review data, and devise solutions to issues surrounding: 1) quality vs. quantity of candidates in educational leadership degree programs/admissions standards, 2) the real or perceived differences in quality for in-state college and university educational leadership programs as based on Louisiana district and school needs, 3) a better approval process or indicators for in-state college, online or out-of-state programs, 4) whether more accountability is needed with intervention when problems are identified, 5) licensure renewal criteria, and 5) meeting certification shortages in specialized areas.

-- Many local school systems should reorganize the structure of their central office personnel around strong and competent leaders who are capable of acting as partners in support of school change and higher student achievement. Central office structures should become “flatter” as personnel become resources to schools. These type of system leaders should act quickly to facilitate instructional expertise and/or diagnostic
help for principals and schools (customized resources that are from within or without the school systems), tap talent and mentor strong candidates, and help principals establish leadership teams, among many other school-focused needs. These types of central office leaders act to bring about more autonomous schools that can then stand on their own. Districts should invest in high-quality training/development to help more central office administrators be highly capable and skilled leaders.

---The Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE] Teacher Leader effort is good and getting better. Efforts should continue with further expansion in mind. From these efforts, more educators with talent and interests can be identified, encouraged, and developed by their local districts for roles as future principals and other school and district leaders. Similarly, efforts to train teacher leaders and establish leader cohorts and networks, such as that by A+PEL, Teach for America, and others should be expanded. Districts must encourage and fund efforts to develop its best teachers.

---The innovative LDOE “Louisiana Believes and Succeed” grant program should be continued in order to advance a myriad of strategies in teacher leader development, principal support around school improvement, and in facilitating school autonomy and turn-around efforts – which by their nature embody effective leadership skills and practices. Important aspects of this initiative include the focus on at-risk students and increasing the people or organizations (public and nonprofit education entities and individuals) who can take part in solutions for poorly resourced locales.

**Leading the way.....Spotlight on Excellence (a sample list)**

During the course of this 11-month project, efforts were made to seek out and identify exceptional work in school leadership in Louisiana and the nation. The entities highlighted below do not in any way constitute a comprehensive list of all local districts, colleges, or NGO initiatives and programs in Louisiana that could be included – again, outreach was limited. But, these serve as prime examples of effective strategies – long and near-term – and efforts worthy of replication. They embody sound research, a demand for excellence, smart tools, creativity or innovation, follow-through, and collaboration. They reflect a good balance of building skills while practicing them. They are proof that settling for “that’s the way we’ve always done it” is not necessary. These education leaders embrace a “good to great” philosophy and show us what’s possible, even practical.

What’s clear is that we needn’t necessarily look outside the state for solutions, though many approaches featured here are built on sound research and best practices from around the country. Given the commonly-held perceptions that school leadership problems are far too prevalent in Louisiana, these organizations and systems, and the individuals who lead them, can provide others with the vision and knowhow. Even so, some out-of-state efforts were also mentioned and described as demonstrating best practices, forward-thinking and getting results. In our backyard or far way, these efforts represent good opportunities to advance quality leadership in education:

**School Leadership Center of New Orleans:** a comprehensive, entrepreneurial high-quality leadership center that offers programs aimed at candidates, principals, school deans and chairs, mid-level school leaders and central office personnel. The SLC’s mission is to advance student achievement through “courageous leadership among principals and other educators based on academic insight, reflective practice and collegial networking.” It is modeled on the Harvard Graduate School of Education work that gave rise to Principal
Centers around the world and adapted the best ideas from other highly effective universities, leadership networks and programs in the nation. SLC directly ties the work of principals to student achievement. It has adopted rigorous selection and program criteria for participants and schools, including its signature 2-year Fellows Program, the Summer Institute for new fellows, the school team Learning Initiative, and the Aspiring Leaders program for strong candidates. SLC also provides customized professional development and a unique in-school experience called Discovery Walks that focus on faculty/school/classroom practices, behaviors, culture, and methods. The SLC got its start via generous support and guidance from the philanthropic community, primarily Baptist Community Ministries. It now thrives on fees-for-services because the need for exceptional leadership training that is effective and useful is tremendous...and SLC delivers. For the first time, the SLC is expanding (Monroe) on a limited basis. Its independence as a stand-alone nonprofit entity is critical to its success and quality—“we can and do offer the best.”

**Jefferson Parish Public School System:** With a new board and Superintendent, the largest urban school system in the state reorganized itself three years ago around a “portfolio strategy” (developed by the Center for Reinventing Public Education), which gives more autonomy and decision-making to principals and schools so that “they could make the best decisions for the students in that building.” This approach led to significant changes, including, reassigning personnel in leadership roles, creating a focus on talent and leadership development, and providing “networks” of job-embedded professional development for leaders and faculty. JPPSS stepped up efforts to recruit and keep its best educators and started its own Leadership Institute. The institute is described as “where highly selective educators will be part of a district internship program” and “create a pipeline of talent” for school leadership. In a very short time span, this large school district has gone from being one in decline on student achievement with mounting challenges, to one showing major progress.

**Teach for America:** Most people know that TFA has a rigorous selection system for bringing highly-educated and committed young teachers to public school classrooms in urban neighborhoods and rural areas of poverty across the nation. TFA corps members embrace, train for and excel in the most challenging conditions and bring high expectations for students. Since 1990, TFA has built a solid and growing presence in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. With expansions in the rural areas/small towns in S. Louisiana and the NELA Delta, the total TFA teachers in the state number about 560 for 2013-14 and over 1000 alumni, most of whom are still in education. What people may not know is that TFA actively develops the leadership skills of its classroom teachers to better serve schools. TFA mentors and supports their strongest educators to reach higher levels of responsibilities such as school creators, directors, deans, principals, curriculum specialists, Superintendents and in public school policy and advocacy. In support of these long-term educators, TFA engages with some of the best leadership development, universities, and graduate school programs in the nation and through its own School Systems Leaders Fellowships to create pipelines in districts. TFA is partnering with Jefferson Parish on these fellowships with plans to expand.

**Ascension Parish Public School System:** APSS is a medium-sized suburban school system that has extensive experience and use of professional tools and techniques to help identify and groom potential leaders. “Leadership Development” is clearly stated as part of its vision and heavily imbues its employees and
faculties with the philosophy of learning and practicing leadership every day in every school for every student. Ascension employs best practices and techniques for strong teams and school-based decision-making that allow teacher leaders to excel and ultimately form a pool of candidates for higher roles. The system is among the best in the state academically with a diverse student population, various geo-economic aspects, and significant enrollment growth each year. For schools that need more significant improvement, the primary strategy is to implement TAP with fidelity, which by design, develops stronger school leaders.

**A+PEL (Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana):** A+PEL is a statewide professional teacher organization with thousands of members statewide. A+PEL has begun to establish programs, networks and other initiatives that not only help classroom teachers be the best at what they do, but also support leadership development among their strongest professionals. A+PEL recently surveyed its members on school leadership issues (see attached A+PEL Survey Results Fall 2013). The results provided insightful, frank and sometime disheartening information about leadership development opportunities for teachers, district efforts, effectiveness of their school leaders, challenges for principals, and incentives. Some of the findings led A+PEL to expand it efforts in teacher leadership development in partnership with AIE (Advanced Innovative Education, a nonprofit provider of leadership training and related services). Together, they have embarked on a customized aspiring leaders program in Richland Parish in impoverished NELA to help teachers there improve their skills as current and future school leaders.

**Breaking Ranks: The Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement,** developed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals in partnership with The Education Alliance at Brown University, is a multi-faceted initiative that covers many aspects of school leadership such as development and “growing your own,” improving school culture and performance, innovation, skills for change, mentoring and coaching, and much more. *Breaking Ranks* offers a wide variety of approaches and techniques, including: online resources, publications, webinars, field guides, workshops, and tools.

**Central Community Schools:** A small school system under strong district and board leadership, it is now in the early stages of developing and implementing a new Leads (Learning Effective Administrative Development Strategies) Academy and a new Principal Internship Program. These leadership development processes and programs are aimed at meeting current school needs and at building a pool of strong candidates for the future – with student achievement at its core. These initiatives demonstrate that even a small school system can provide high-quality leadership selection and development efforts. As one of the fastest growing school systems in the state, Central is not waiting for leadership problems to emerge or face a dearth in good choices; they are adopting a proactive approach.

**New Schools Baton Rouge and New Schools New Orleans:** These highly creative and entrepreneurial nonprofit education entities have shown they can facilitate the growth and access to high-quality leadership development. While they use different strategies and are scaled differently, NSNO and NSBR continue to prove that these types of organizations can play an important role in recruiting new leaders and building a
strong pipeline of education leaders in large cities. Their mission, structure and strategies allow them to pin-
point local needs, adapt or replicate the best practices and programs in the nation here in Louisiana,
collaborate at will, act quickly, and serve as an independent voice for positive change. Both insist in the
principles of autonomy, accountability, student achievement and expanding opportunities for
transformational change. Though NSNO is larger and has many more years of success, both entities are
building community support and excitement for excellence in public schools.

🌟 **Breakthrough Schools:** *Learn From the Experiences of the MetLife Foundation and NASSP (May 2012, Principal Leadership, National Association of Secondary School Principals) [www.nassp.org/breakthrough](http://www.nassp.org/breakthrough)*

🌟 **LSU, Southeastern University, and Northwestern University:** Time and time again during the project
research, these public colleges and universities were mentioned by people who hire educators, as having a
“quality” teacher preparation and/or educational leadership degree programs. There may be others that
could be added to this list, but our limited scope did not allow for statewide outreach.

🌟 **Lafayette Parish School System:** A medium-to-large system with a central city and small town/rural
areas, it has recently instituted various efforts that support and develop its school leaders or potential
leaders. The leadership of the system has reorganized its central office and schools around a vision of
excellence and academic growth for all of its students. Leading change in a system, while implementing new
state polices and standards, has created a need to expand the pipeline of high-quality school leaders
prepared and eager to meet the challenges. District leaders have reached out to the University of Louisiana –
Lafayette to explore ways to improve the pool of educators and school leaders for the changing needs of
school systems in the region.

🌟 **RELAY Graduate School of Education** and the **Tulane Cowen Institute, Columbia University Teachers
College Summer Principal Institute at Tulane University and Loyola University New Orleans** offer non-
traditional but exceptional nationally accredited programs here in Louisiana that focus on aspiring school
leaders. Both stress the practical more than the theoretical academic approach. **RELAY GSE** also conducts the
**National Principals Academy Fellowship**, which is a selective school leadership program with practice-based
programs, tools and feedback with goals tied to creating great schools.

🌟 At the risk of leaving out other efforts we were not made aware of, several were mentioned as strong
examples of high-quality development and support of school and district leaders though we were unable to
interview their representatives due to limited time and resources: Lincoln, Zachary Community, West Baton
Rouge, St. James, Calcasieu, and Desoto parishes; The New Teacher Project: Pathway to Urban Leadership;
charter schools apprenticeships in partnership with LDOE; Ryan Fellowships; New Educators; Columbia
University Summer Principals Institute; Advanced Innovative Education; LDOE Believe and Succeed initiatives;
and several individual leaders in schools and district offices.
END NOTE: Next to teaching, school leadership can have the strongest impact on student academic success. Louisiana is ranked #48 in student achievement by Education Week’s *Quality Counts*. Only 2 out of 10 of its 4th graders read at the national level of proficiency (NAEP), 10,000 or more of its teens drop out of school each year, and so many of its high school graduates are underprepared that over a third of those who attend college have to take remedial non-credit courses. Louisiana’s local school systems need more leaders who can make a difference.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS; RESEARCH, RESOURCES, ORGANIZATIONS

We appreciate the many extraordinary individuals and organizations who contributed to our understanding of these issues, may have participated in various activities of the project, and/or provided information and recommendations. Many are listed here and many others wished their names to remain confidential. As mentioned earlier, these individuals did not approve this report or necessarily share in all the observations or recommendations. It has been strictly the projects leaders’ assessment and combination of all that was learned. We sincerely thank the many leaders in our state who shared with us their insights, passion for excellence, and experience!

Holly Boffy, Educator, BESE member, (Lafayette/Lake Charles), Elected-7th District
Connie Bradford, former principal, (Lincoln Parish), BESE member, At-Large Appointment
Kira Orange Jones, Educator, BESE Member, (New Orleans), Elected-1st District
Dr. Jim Meza, Superintendent; School Board Members Mike Delesdernier (President) and Larry Dale, all of Jefferson Parish Public Schools
Michael Faulk, Superintendent, Central Community Public Schools; past-Chair, Louisiana Superintendents Association
Michael Tipton, CEO; Laura Vinsant, Managing Director; and Brian Adams; Teach For America, South Louisiana
Dr. Brian Reidlinger, CEO/President, The School Leadership Center of New Orleans
Debbie Schum, Executive Director, Louisiana Association of Principals
Andrea Martin, Past-president, Louisiana Association of Principals
Keith Courville, Executive Director; Polly Broussard, former President; and Jennifer Andrews, Program Director, all of Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana (A+PEL)
Chris Meyer, CEO and Catherine Pozniack, COO and Co-founder, New Schools for Baton Rouge
Dr. Pat Cooper, Superintendent, Lafayette Parish Public School System
Neerav Kingsland, CEO and Tom Shepley, Managing Director, New School for New Orleans
Robbie Evans, Board of Directors, Lafayette Charter Management
Dr. Rose Peterson, Executive Director, East Bank Collaborative
Patrice Pujol, Superintendent Ascension Parish Public Schools; Chair, Louisiana Superintendents Association
Dr. Jeanne Burns, Assistant Commissioner, Louisiana Board of Regents
Kelli Bottger, educator, former teacher leader program director for A+PEL
Veronica Brooks, Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools
Dr. Kristy Hebert, Education Leadership Development Consultant
Southern Regional Education Board [SREB]
National Association of Secondary School Principals / Education Alliance at Brown University
National Association of Elementary School Principals, Leading Learning Communities
School Leadership Center for New Orleans
The Ryan Fellowships /Accelerate Institute
KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) School Leadership Initiatives
Columbia University Summer Principals Academy
International Center for Leadership in Education
The Wallace Foundation
Harvard University GSE School Leadership Program
Center for Reinventing Public Education
RELAY Graduate School of Education (teacher leaders and principals academy)
Uncommon Schools
...and other current and retired district and school leaders, educators, state leaders, school innovators, school board members and researchers.