Leadership in Action
Statewide Initiative
LEADERSHIP IN ACTION | Colorado’s School Leadership Pilot Program

Before Katy Anthes became Colorado’s 65th Commissioner of Education, she served as Executive Director of Educator Effectiveness with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and oversaw a project designed to capture information from education leaders regarding their professional learning needs. The data gleaned from that project was clear: there were significant gaps in the resources and support principals were receiving. This, coupled with her past work researching effective school leadership, catalyzed a desire to do more to support school principals in the state of Colorado.

“We were so focused on teachers and superintendents, but were missing the crucial middle management layer,” says Colleen O’Neil, Associate Commissioner of the Educator Talent Division. “Yet much of the pressure for school improvement lives on principals’ shoulders.”

As happens, the initial data collection and resulting action plan was shelved due to other priorities as well as leadership and staffing changes. Then Anthes was appointed Commissioner. The data collection and research was powerful, and she knew it pointed to an important opportunity for the CDE to make a real difference for educators and students in communities across the state.

She unearthed the initiative and tasked her team with understanding and refreshing the initial findings. In 2017, CDE staff members started talking to stakeholders—including teachers, principals, district officials, association representatives, and other community stakeholders—to more deeply understand their needs. These conversations reinforced and added additional color to the previous data: principals needed additional resources and support, and teachers wanted their principals to have more support, too. Further, teachers expressed a clear desire for more leadership opportunities connected to the work they were doing in their classrooms and school communities. From those conversations, state officials developed a theory of action regarding how they could develop a system of support—not management, not compliance—for school leaders that focused on building their capacity to grow, develop, and support instructional leaders in their buildings and on creating cultures and systems to bolster distributive leadership models.

A real turning point came when legislators began asking questions about Colorado’s teacher shortages. The Commissioner had a trove of stakeholder data and past experience that provided important insights on what educators needed to feel energized and sustained in their work. If addressed, those gaps could become opportunities to support the retention of great educators already working in schools and create environments that would make education a more attractive profession for others. The State Board and legislators, including state Representative Barbara McLachlan (D-59), were listening.

“Our Commissioner and Board really deserve credit for creating systems and processes for keeping in touch with and working with our legislative body,” says O’Neil. “We are also really fortunate to have a Board and legislators who see us as an important resource. Breaking down silos is not easy, but it’s important.”

Although initial legislation regarding CDE’s principal support priority didn’t move forward, the Commissioner, Representative McLachlan, and other state leaders—including Representative James Wilson (R-60), making it a bipartisan process—kept in touch and continued sharing information and advocating with other decision-makers. The stakeholder data proved essential, providing early supporters of the initiative with real information on what the constituents of other Members of the General Assembly needed.

Finally, late in the 2019 legislative session, HB19-1002 passed with unanimous support and was eventually signed into law by Governor Jared Polis. The law created a pilot program through which school leaders could receive “embedded, experiential professional development to...empower them to exercise distributive and collaborative leadership” with an ultimate goal to “increase educator retention, improve school climate and culture, and improve student academic outcomes.” The final legislative language represented a compromise, in some cases removing components (e.g., mandatory stipends for participating principals, which became grants to local entities based on funding availability), in other cases adding greater specificity (e.g., regarding how and when certain aspects of the program would be implemented), and still others becoming more flexible to support effective implementation across a wide range of local and school contexts. Crucially, legislators appropriated real dollars to make the pilot possible. (“Where did they find the money?” O’Neil asks, somewhat jokingly, reflecting on the challenge of securing financial support for new initiatives during tight fiscal times. “Legislators understood how deeply connected this program is to needs identified in their communities, and I really believe that’s what made the difference.”

Thus far, stakeholder engagement proved essential and CDE officials were committed to continuing to bring in a diversity of perspectives to help them design the program. Again, the close collaboration between state leaders was important: though the bill
passed in May 2019, CDE officials have almost an entire year to develop the program before they need to report back to legislators on the design of the program.

“It is very rare to have that kind of time for planning,” O’Neil shares. “Representatives McLachlan and Wilson want us to get this right. With this time, we are able to conduct personal interviews and be really collaborative and thoughtful about the program design. I can’t tell you how immensely helpful it is.”

To help lead the initiative, CDE hired Robyn Hamasaki, an experienced school leader with deep expertise in the pilot program’s focus areas. Hamasaki spends her days traveling across the state and connecting with district and school leaders. Using the Design Thinking model as a guide, these “empathy interviews” are structured to gather a wide range of information.

“We need information from a logistical standpoint that’s going to help us create a program that meets statutory requirements,” Hamasaki notes. “Equally important, we want the program to matter to participants and all stakeholders in their hearts and souls. We want to design a program that really makes a difference.”

Through the stakeholder engagement process, Hamasaki is also creating a list of potential principal coaches. For this initial pilot, principal coaches will be invited to support principals who participate in the program rather than through an application process. She is using a combination of hard data from CDE and word-of-mouth recommendations to identify prospective candidates.

“We know how important it is for principals to have a coach at their side as they are transforming practice in their schools,” she shares. “Yet we also know that being a strong principal does not automatically mean you are an effective coach to other principals. We are looking for people who are problem-solvers and systems-thinkers, who aren’t satisfied with mediocrity and have a track record of driving results, and who can provide feedback to leaders that will help them think and act differently in ways that are based on best practices and also specific to their school communities.”

Hamasaki also notes their mentor principals competencies are tightly aligned to the state’s principal quality standards and turnaround leader competencies, supporting coherency and alignment with other initiatives and state requirements.

“Through the interviews, we’re gathering important information and we’re also building support and buy-in from people who are going to be part of implementation,” Hamasaki adds. “This is exactly the type of professional development I would have wanted as a principal, and we want everyone to see that value from day one.”

The team is in the process of building out specific metrics they’ll use to measure success and track progress over the course of the pilot period, which runs through July 2022. The vision for the work is ambitious.

“We want the entire school community to be involved in planning and organizing their work,” O’Neil explains. “We want teachers to feel valued, included, and satisfied in their job. We want them to experience a real sense of efficacy and like their talents, individually and collectively, are making a difference. We want them to feel like leadership is truly distributive and they are growing and leading together. If we can master distributive leadership, we’ll have the synergy to create optimal learning environments in all of our schools, helping all students learn at high levels.”