ACHIEVING MORE, TOGETHER

Improving School and Student Outcomes via Distributed Leadership

A Policy Primer
ABOUT NEW LEADERS

To equip students with real choices in life and build schools that reflect our hopes and dreams for the future, we need determined, unwavering school leaders committed to the truth that every student can excel. New Leaders forges deep partnerships to equip school leaders at all levels to be powerful and positive forces for change. We provide best-in-class leadership training that ensures schools are set up to provide all students with challenging, engaging learning experiences in every classroom, every day, year after year. To date, we have developed 4,000 leaders who annually reach more than half a million students in communities across the country. To support even more students and communities, we champion evidence-based policies that reflect the transformative power of exceptional school leaders and that break down structural and institutional barriers to student achievement and educational equity. By transforming our schools, we’ll transform our society.

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INTRODUCTION | Background and Goals

Schools that support teachers and other community members in exercising leadership look and feel different from schools where decision-making is centralized. A growing body of research, backed by the experience of educators across the country, supports expanded – or “distributed” – leadership as a critical strategy for achieving real, sustained results for students and creating school environments where teachers love to work.

As the principalship has increased its focus on instructional leadership, the role has become vastly more complex and demanding. Principals, no matter how masterful, cannot— and should not— do it all alone. Instead, great principals cultivate leaders and leadership teams within their buildings to help shoulder leadership responsibilities. And we have new evidence that officials can support these efforts—and improve schools—by building leadership pipelines at the system level.

“Successful organizations don’t rely on a single person. At the system level, for us to unlock the potential of our educators and build greater consistency and sustainability... we need to be much more deliberate about building our bench of leaders. Leadership... shouldn’t depend on the role you’re in. It should be based on how you advance the mission of the organization and inspire others to do the same.”

—Matt Lyons, Chief Talent Officer, Chicago Public Schools

Growing leadership capacity within schools also addresses a critical problem: the historically “flat” nature of the teaching profession is not meeting the needs of today’s workforce. Teachers want opportunities to grow in their careers and take on new challenges, even if they are not interested in pursuing an administrative role that takes them completely out of the classroom. As a result, shared, collaborative, collective, and teacher leadership initiatives are on the rise. For example, 36 states proposed investing in teacher leadership in their plans to implement school improvement provisions under federal law, and 35 states now have teacher leadership policies on the books.

As these initiatives flourish, questions arise about how they are related and whether they are effective. Distributed leadership is often used as an umbrella term for these approaches. But what defines distributed leadership? How do teacher-leader roles fit into the distributed leadership approach? And most crucially, what do we know about how distributed leadership approaches ultimately affect school and student outcomes?

Our goals for this policy primer—and the larger Distributed Leadership Toolkit—are to:

1. Present a research- and practice-based definition of distributed leadership;
2. Highlight school and student outcomes associated with effective distributed leadership approaches;
3. Draw out the key components of distributed leadership;
4. Understand the distributed leadership policy landscape; and
5. Support policymakers in taking action to support distributed leadership and improve school and student outcomes.

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The concept of “distributed leadership” crops up throughout the education sector. Through a review of state and district distributed leadership initiatives, it became clear that people who make or influence policies and practices at the system level need a greater understanding of the concept. On the basis of our literature review, as well as our decades of experience training school and system-level leaders, we have developed the following research- and practice-based definition of distributed leadership:

**DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP | A DEFINITION FOR POLICYMAKERS**

Distributed leadership refers to a range of flexible approaches to school organization, management, and operations that expand traditional conceptions of leadership to include a wide range of both formal and informal leadership roles and activities.

While the specifics may vary by context, all models include an effective principal who fosters a trusting culture, promotes collaboration, and organizes, taps, and marshals school resources (including through staffing, scheduling, and other structures and strategies) to help build the leadership and overall capacity of teachers, students, parents, and the school community as a whole.

When these elements are in place, distributed leadership approaches can yield important improvements to school and student outcomes that may exceed the sum of individual contributions.

Additional detail can be found in [Resource A: Distributed Leadership | A Definition for Policymakers](#).

> “Everyone has certain expectations about what a leader is supposed to be. I’m in charge, that top-down sort of thing. Ultimately, being true to myself and what I know our community needs, I have been able to model and give an open invitation to teachers and students to chart their own course. We are doing things differently at our school because business as usual wasn’t working for our students.”

—Donnell Cannon, Principal, North Edgecombe High School in Tarboro, NC

**LITERATURE REVIEW | Distributed Leadership Research Findings**

To help policymakers at all levels more deeply understand distributed leadership and the variety of ways it may manifest at the school level, we conducted a comprehensive review of the research on distributed leadership. We initially examined more than 70 studies and articles on distributed leadership and related topics. Of those, 32 seminal works met our criteria for inclusion in the in-depth literature review and are listed at the end of [Resource B: Distributed Leadership | Literature Review Findings](#).

The research suggests distributed leadership offers a powerful way to help schools achieve what they cannot under the leadership of a single principal or even a small group of administrators. Distributed leadership models may enhance schools’ capacity for organizational learning and for collective improvement by tapping un- or under-utilized leadership potential in a school. As a result, distributed approaches may support more sustainable school improvement. Listed below are important school and student outcomes achieved through distributed leadership approaches, as well as information on how those outcomes meet evidence requirements under federal law.

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5. See Section 8101(21)(A) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP | SCHOOL AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

1) Promotes Collaboration—Strong Evidence
2) Fosters Teacher Leadership—Strong Evidence
3) Supports Instructional Improvement—Moderate Evidence
4) May Increase Teacher Job Satisfaction and Foster Stronger Organizational Commitment—Promising Evidence
5) May Contribute to Increased Student Achievement—Promising Evidence

The strongest evidence comes from two reports—one by Jonathan Supovitz and Namrata Tognatta, and another by Dr. Supovitz and Matthew Riggan—based on data gathered via an experimental study of the Philadelphia Distributed Leadership Initiative. These reports show that distributed leadership approaches led to increased collaboration among school staff and more opportunities for teachers to engage in leadership.10, 11 A report by Eric Camburn and S.W. Han—supported by moderate evidence—assesses data from a quasi-experimental study of the America’s Choice Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Program, which relies heavily on a distributed leadership approach to reorganizing schools, and offers empirical evidence that distributing leadership led to significant changes in instructional practices.12 In addition, a number of correlational studies point to potential outcomes related to teachers’ job satisfaction and commitment to their schools, suggesting distributed leadership approaches may support teacher retention efforts.13, 14, 15 Finally, two correlational studies of collaborative and collective leadership approaches—one authored by Phillip Hallinger and Ronald Heck, another by Kenneth Leithwood and Blair Mascall—offer promising evidence that distributed leadership approaches can lead to measurable improvements in student achievement.16, 17

Additional detail on these outcomes, studies, and evidence tiers can be found in Resource B: Distributed Leadership | Literature Review Findings.

Although the research has not prescribed a pre-packaged distributed leadership program, through our literature review we also identified a set of six common characteristics of effective distributed leadership models.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP | 6 KEY ELEMENTS

Key Element 1: An Effective Principal
Key Element 2: Collaborative Learning, Problem-Solving, and Decision-Making
Key Element 3: Strategic Opportunities for Engagement
Key Element 4: Empowered Staff and Community Members, Especially Teacher Leaders
Key Element 5: A Culture of Trust
Key Element 6: A Focus on Capacity-Building

Additional detail on these elements can be found in Resource B: Distributed Leadership | Literature Review Findings.

Finally, when designing policies and strategies to advance distributed leadership initiatives and models, officials should consider a number of challenges and limitations with the research and with distributed leadership approaches more generally.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP | RESEARCH AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Policymakers should prioritize outcomes over prescribed inputs when developing research-based, actionable strategies to foster effective distributed leadership models in states, districts, and school systems across the country. In particular, where empirical research is lacking, policymakers may need to invest in research, rely on data (including data gathered via stakeholder engagement), or design logic models that connect research to measurable outcomes. The overall goal is to ensure that the theories of action underpinning distributed leadership policies are sound.

We explain these issues in greater depth in Resource C: Distributed Leadership | Research and Policy Considerations.

After the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 was enacted, each state was required to develop and submit to the U.S. Department of Education a plan explaining how it will comply with and carry out the requirements of the new law.18 States’ plans to implement ESSA are an important resource for understanding the education policy landscape. Our initial analyses, carried out in 2017 and published in 2018,19 looked at leadership strategies proposed across the leadership continuum, from the recruitment and preparation of aspiring leaders to evaluation, support, and retention of those leaders once on the job.

Given the growing interest in distributed leadership, we conducted a targeted review to better understand the role of distributed approaches in states’ leadership agendas and overall goals for student achievement and school improvement.

Eighteen states proposed distributed leadership approaches in their ESSA plans.

In most cases, the strategies outlined in states’ ESSA plans do not rely on a clear definition of distributed leadership. A notable exception is in Michigan. In its plan, officials define distributed leadership as “a model of management within a school wherein the principal shares the traditional set of school leadership tasks with other staff in a manner that is coordinated and led by the principal. There is no singular model of distributed leadership; however, to be effective and sustainable, specific roles for teacher leaders within the model must be tied to specific identified priorities and then the teacher leaders must be afforded the time, support, and resources to make the role effective.”20

“I’m not a top-down leader. I’m a collective leader. Our teachers have the expertise, and it’s my job to ignite their passion and to provide them with the support and conditions they need to come up with solutions to meet our students’ needs. When I do things right, they are really leading a lot of the decisions we make as a school.”

—Hugo Saucedo, Principal, Benjamin Franklin Elementary in San Antonio, TX

In Arkansas, officials are proposing to create a distributed leadership credential. In addition, shared leadership is included as a key component of the state’s vision of effective leadership: “An effective leader promotes the success and well-being of every student by... [e]ngaging all stakeholders in shared leadership to accomplish the vision.”21

19 New Leaders, 2018.
Other states’ plans highlight the role of distributed approaches and values within existing leadership initiatives. Officials in Hawaii recognize “the importance of shared and effective leadership at all levels,” a value built into “the shared leadership model” promoted by the Hawaii Department of Education’s Leadership Institute. Understanding “the importance of shared leadership within schools and districts” across the state, officials in Illinois plan to continue supporting the educator leader network (ELN), coordinating state and federal dollars for school leader support within and across districts. And officials in Tennessee intend to continue the Principal Peer Partnership (P3) initiative “to provide a system of collaboration and support for instructional leaders and to engage administrators... [in] actionable ideas to develop shared leadership capacity.”

Some states—including California, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Utah—plan to invest in new professional development for school leaders focused on building their knowledge and skills related to distributed or shared leadership. Officials in Michigan highlight the importance of federal Title II-A dollars to support their plans, which also include developing guidance on staffing structures and differentiated compensation strategies for teacher leaders. In addition, Rhode Island officials plan to use the new Title II leadership set-aside to support school leadership professional development, along with toolkits to support districts in enacting and sustaining shared leadership structures.

Several other states have proposed supporting distributed approaches in schools identified for improvement under the state accountability system. In Florida, regional field teams support districts across the state that have schools identified for comprehensive or targeted support and improvement. These field teams serve as liaisons between districts and the state, and they provide strategic problem-solving and capacity-building in a number of areas, including shared leadership. In New Hampshire, the plans for schools identified for improvement may include shared leadership structures. North Carolina’s plan calls for relevant school and system leaders in districts where more than half of schools have been identified for improvement to receive coaching in collaborative leadership. And in Oklahoma, staff at schools that fail to exit improvement status after three years may be required to engage in professional development in priority areas that include collaborative leadership.

Citing research on the importance of working conditions and career paths, officials in Mississippi and New York have positioned shared leadership structures and systems, at both the school and system levels, as strategies to address teacher and leader turnover and retention.

“As part of our approach to distributed leadership, about half of Envision teachers serve in leadership roles.... This is both a strategic and a practical matter. Strategically, we know teachers want to grow and make a difference outside of their classrooms, and leadership offers a way for us to meet that need and keep them fulfilled over time. Practically speaking, there is just that much work that has to get done in order for us to do right by students. To make the work sustainable, we have to carefully and thoughtfully share the load.”

—Laura Robell, Chief Schools Officer, Envision Education

In Ohio, shared leadership is one of five critical components the state has identified to support its Early Literacy Plan and Pilot Program.

Finally, in Kentucky, officials highlight their ongoing commitment to supporting Local School-Based Decision-Making Councils (SBDM), structures through which parents, teachers, and school leaders share leadership and work together to “set school policy and make decisions outlined in statute” in order to “provide an environment to enhance student achievement.”

Clearly, sizable interest exists and real work is happening at the state level pertaining to expanding leadership. Further, our analyses point to a wide range of strategies—and related terminology—proposed by state officials that all fall under the umbrella of distributed leadership. While our analyses focused on how distributed leadership approaches are present in ESSA state plans, we know these concepts are taking hold in other states as well. Indiana, for example, named teacher leadership as a priority in its ESSA state plan and subsequently passed legislation establishing a Career Ladders Grant program that includes an option for districts to pursue a distributed leadership approach. These initiatives and activities highlight the complex, flexible nature of distributed leadership approaches.

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Federal leaders and staff can bolster state and local efforts to support principals in enacting distributed leadership approaches in their schools. Actions include providing adequate funding for educational investments and directing federal dollars toward evidence-based leadership strategies that could include distributed leadership approaches, providing technical assistance and convening state and local leaders to learn from one another and other experts, and continuing to invest in research to build the evidence base on distributed leadership.

**Congressional Actions**

**Raise awareness and build knowledge of distributed leadership.** The U.S. Congress, especially authorizing committees, can hold hearings on distributed leadership to raise awareness and build the knowledge of elected representatives, their staffs, and others. Officials can invite researchers, state and local policymakers, school leaders, parents, students, and other stakeholders to testify and offer their unique insights on what works and what doesn’t when it comes to advancing distributed leadership at the local and school levels.

**Invest in distributed leadership.** As states ramp up efforts to prioritize smart investments in leadership, including distributed leadership, the U.S. Congress can appropriate funds for programs explicitly designed to support evidence-based leadership initiatives and partnerships. In particular, Congress can sufficiently fund competitive grant programs, such as the School Leader Recruitment and Support Program (SLRSP), the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program, the Teacher and School Leader (TSL) grants program, and the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program. Congress also can use language in appropriations reports to encourage states and districts to use federal dollars to invest in evidence-based, locally tailored strategies to support distributed leadership using their existing Title I and Title II grants.

**Administrative Actions**

**Provide technical assistance and resources on distributed leadership.** The U.S. Department of Education, directly or by convening communities of practice led by expert organizations, can provide technical assistance and resources to states on how to create supportive conditions and take strategic actions to foster effective distributed leadership approaches in schools and systems within their states. The Department can also issue guidance on using Title I and Title II formula funds to invest in evidence-based, locally tailored distributed leadership approaches.

**Direct federal funds toward projects focused on school leadership.** Even where not required by statute, the U.S. Department of Education can use a grant priority to direct federal dollars toward leadership programs and initiatives, including those focused on distributed leadership, as an evidence-based strategy for improving school and student outcomes. Such a priority could be particularly valuable for the SEED, TSL, and EIR programs—each of which has funded projects designed to improve leadership, teaching, and learning in high-need schools. The priority could also be used to direct funding toward leadership via other programs, such as the launch of new charter schools or the expansion of successful ones.

**Invest in a school leadership research agenda,** especially through grants and competitions administered by the Institute for Education Sciences (IES), which could support new, more rigorous distributed leadership research. Update the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) website to include resources specific to school leadership (e.g., by adding a searchable “Leadership Excellence” topic to complement the “Teacher Excellence” topic) and distributed leadership (e.g., by creating a Practice Guide for school leaders on distributing leadership).

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27 Existing language of Priority 8 in the Secretary’s Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs could be used to direct federal competitive grant dollars toward projects focused on distributed leadership. In particular, the U.S. Department of Education could highlight the connection between the research on distributed leadership and strategies under subsection (a) “developing new career pathways for effective educators to assume leadership roles while maintaining instructional responsibilities,” subsection (d) “promoting innovative strategies to increase the number of students who have access to effective principals or other school leaders,” and subsection (e) “developing or implementing innovative staffing or compensation models to attract or retain effective educators.”
State leaders and staff can encourage district and charter network leaders to create more-supportive local conditions for principals to enact distributed leadership approaches in their schools. This effort should emphasize using data and strategic communications to raise awareness about the value of distributed leadership, providing technical assistance and sharing or connecting local leaders to successful models, and securing and directing financial resources to support evidence-based approaches.

**Legislative Actions**

- **Create and fund statewide distributed leadership initiatives.** Promote innovation by working closely with colleagues at the relevant state and local agencies, as well as with other stakeholders, to develop—and provide funding for—new programs that are designed to advance distributed leadership approaches across the state in ways that meet local needs.

**Governor and Chief State School Officer Actions**

- **Raise awareness about the value of distributed leadership.** Using public communications, message clearly and consistently the value of distributed leadership in supporting shared goals. Through strategic, thoughtful, nuanced messages, convey the importance of distributed approaches for advancing goals related to top education priorities and strategies, from school turnaround to teacher leadership, teacher retention, and meaningful family and community engagement.

- **Encourage other state leaders and stakeholders to invest themselves in a shared vision of distributed leadership.** Build buy-in for distributed leadership by engaging with other state leaders, including legislators and professional education associations, in strategic, ongoing conversations grounded in the research, local data, and stakeholder insights. Use these conversations as the foundation from which to develop, garner support for, and pitch evidence-based distributed leadership initiatives.

**Chief State School Officer and State Department of Education Actions**

- **Invest in and encourage evidence-based distributed leadership approaches.** Invest in evidence-based distributed leadership approaches, including by using the federal Title II leadership set-aside to support leadership programs and partnerships, with a strong focus on distributed leadership and a track record of success in achieving critical school and student outcomes. Ask districts—via their ESSA-required local plan—to explain how their strategies incorporate best practices in leadership development, including distributed leadership, and how those approaches meet the law’s evidence requirements.

- **Use data collection to enhance and make the case for distributed leadership.** Using existing or targeted new sources, collect and review key data to deeply understand the state’s needs and readiness for distributed leadership initiatives. For example, review data on your principal pipeline (e.g., anticipated vacancies, expected enrollment in preparation programs, and geographic alignment between those data) and teacher corps (e.g., survey data on the quality of support they receive from principals and the availability of school-based leadership opportunities). Using that analysis, determine whether it is possible to build on strengths and address gaps via targeted measures (e.g., launching a statewide distributed leadership academy for leaders of rural schools) or if more comprehensive steps are necessary (e.g., updating program-approval processes). Moving forward, use data to inform the continuous improvement of distributed leadership initiatives.

- **Provide technical assistance, models, and other resources on distributed leadership.** Develop guidance for districts regarding the leadership actions whereby principals, with adequate support from their supervisors, can focus their time and attention in order to maximize the effectiveness of distributed leadership in their buildings. For example, the Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL) includes “Develop[ing] the capacity, opportunities, and support for teacher leadership and leadership from other members of the school community” under Standard 6(g). Provide district and school leaders with resources that are specific to discrete aspects of distributed models, such as sample teacher leader job descriptions in which the roles are clearly defined and flexible enough to address school needs. Highlight evidence-based programs designed to build the leadership capacity of entire instructional leadership teams in support of school improvement goals.

- **Promote balanced autonomy and remove regulatory hurdles that hinder distributed leadership.** States can promote local autonomy by removing regulatory barriers that prevent schools from taking steps to foster distributed leadership approaches. For example, update licensure requirements that prevent non-administrators, such as teacher leaders, from conducting observations. Consider allowing educators who do not hold an administrative license to get approved to observe their peers by demonstrating requisite skills through high-quality training.
Local school system leaders and staff can create conditions that support principals to enact distributed leadership approaches in their schools, including by building leadership pipelines and aligned, appropriately flexible strategies, systems, and supports for leaders at all levels of the system.

Superintendent or Charter Network Chief Executive Actions

**Establish clear priorities for fostering distributed leadership, and galvanize your team to align systems to support your vision.** Including via the actions outlined below. Ensure that leadership initiatives align with your strategic plan. In addition, reinforce—via communications and especially improved systems, processes, and strategies—the connection between your top priorities (e.g., a specific partnership or initiative) and your shared goals for school and student success.

**Continue to elevate and reinforce the importance of your leadership priorities.** Message clearly and consistently the value of distributed leadership in supporting your vision. Directly connect with school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and community members to highlight priority leadership initiatives and strategies to reinforce your deep, personal commitment to building shared, sustained leadership models within and across schools in the system.

Additional District or Charter Network Official Actions

**Model the type of leadership necessary to foster effective distributed leadership at the system level.** Align words with actions by prioritizing deep, meaningful stakeholder engagement in decisions about system priorities and strategies. Identify and build the capacity of leaders at all levels of the system who can help inform decisions, are likely to influence colleagues and other stakeholders, and will play a critical role in successfully implementing school improvement strategies.

**Prioritize building leadership pipelines, and invest in evidence-based leadership development for educators at all levels.** Take steps to support principals as instructional leaders and talent developers by creating coherent, system-wide strategies for educators at all levels to build aligned leadership experiences and skills, tailored to their roles and career trajectories. Ensure that opportunities reflect system needs and are flexible enough to meet the distinct needs of schools and educators.

**Ensure sustainable funding for your leadership pipeline.** Directly invest in evidence-based, job-embedded teacher leader training, principal preparation and support, and instructional leadership team professional development options that have a proven track record of improving school and student outcomes. Use existing federal Title I and Title II dollars to pay for training or stipends for new leadership positions. Consider funding discrete initiatives by applying for funding through federal competitive grant programs, such as those listed in the Congressional and Administrative Actions sections above.

**Provide principals with balanced autonomy to promote distributed leadership.** Update policies and procedures to ensure that principals have authority to hire their teams, deploy their budgets, and create school schedules and structures that support the distributed leadership model that works best for their school communities. In a related action, remove local policy barriers that could prevent principals from hiring and strategically promoting and coaching educators into leadership positions.

**Ensure that district calendars and schedules support school action regarding distributed leadership.** In particular, consult with principals and other stakeholders to revisit the school year calendar and support the creation of daily school schedules (e.g., via models and exemplars) that are conducive to collaboration, professional learning, shared problem-solving and decision-making structures, and other systems that principals must put in place to support distributed leadership.

**Invest in principal supervisors who can coach and model effective distributed leadership.** Provide support and mentoring for principals specifically regarding distributed leadership, and consider extending that support to other leaders within the building, where appropriate. Ensure that job descriptions, recruitment, selection, and ongoing support for principal supervisors reflect their responsibility for supporting principals to distribute leadership; this action includes prioritizing the hiring of former school leaders who have successfully implemented distributed leadership approaches and who can model the strategic vulnerability necessary to build and sustain a foundational culture of trust with the principals and schools they oversee.

**Encourage and support school leaders to strategically engage students, families, and community members in leadership.** From hiring through support and performance management, reinforce the connection between thoughtful community engagement and school and student outcomes. Support principals in integrating students, families, and other community members into problem-solving and decision-making structures, with a specific eye toward building their leadership capacity.
VIGNETTES | Distributed Leadership in Action

To bring the research and policy actions to life, we have developed a series of vignettes that show how school and system leaders are distributing leadership and, together, improving results for schools and students. By capturing their learning and experiences, we aim to help illustrate what is possible when supportive, evidence-based practices and conditions are in place. In some cases, these stories also help fill in gaps in the research by showcasing locally tailored strategies that test elements that currently have a less robust (or missing) evidence base.

Leadership in Action | School Leader features Hugo Saucedo, Principal, Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in San Antonio, Texas.

Leadership in Action | Charter Network Leader features Laura Robell, Chief of Schools, Envision Education in the San Francisco Bay Area, California.

Leadership in Action | Small Rural District features Donnell Cannon, Principal, North Edgecombe High School in Tarboro, North Carolina, and a partnership among Edgecombe County Public Schools, NC State University, and two nonprofits.

Leadership in Action | Large Metropolitan District features Dr. Allison Tingwall, Principal, Curie High School in Chicago, Illinois, along with officials who have engaged with Chicago Public Schools’ Lead with CPS initiative.

Leadership in Action | Statewide Initiative features Colorado’s School Leadership Pilot Program, made possible by close collaboration between the state’s legislative and executive branches.

CONCLUSION | Making a Difference for Students Within and Across Schools and Systems

Distributed leadership approaches extend traditional conceptions of leadership and call on officials to think differently about how policies can strengthen school communities and students’ educational experiences. By grounding policies in the six key elements outlined above, policymakers can support schools in fostering and sustaining the spirit of initiative, collaboration, and mutual support that is central to effective distributed leadership models. When well-designed and well-implemented, the results can be transformative for schools, communities, and, most crucially, America’s children.

“We want the entire school community to be involved in planning and organizing their work. 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.”

—Colleen O’Neil, Associate Commissioner of the Educator Talent Division, Colorado Department of Education