Anatomy Of Change

Planning and Resourcing State-Level Education Reform Initiatives

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The state of Washington is facing a series of unprecedented K-12 education challenges. The confluence of state and federal education reform related initiatives, historic levels of accountability, and major funding shortfalls are seen as overwhelming. On the other hand, these momentous and shifting conditions of education reform, accountability, and major resource shortfalls can be viewed as an opportunity for positive, state-wide transformation. Everyone from teachers in the classroom, school principals, superintendents, school boards, and state officials must be willing to change to new and better ways to help students achieve. However, the first, and most critical change must include assigning overall responsibility for the planning, implementation and resource alignment of all state and federally generated education reform related mandates.

One of the unfortunate consequences of the proliferation of legislatively enacted requirements is that no one source or agency monitors the total burden imposed on school districts by the state and federal government. And a complicating factor inhibiting more positive state control, is that there is not one state-wide list detailing all active initiatives currently impacting school districts. If the State Department of Health supports legislation which affects schools, there is no clearing house to assess the actual impact—such legislation is simply added to the amorphous total of requirements placed on school systems without adequate funding to pay the costs and/or time to implement the required changes. Since no one person or agency knows the totality of the mandated load, there is not adequate counsel for individuals, agencies, departments, and governmental bodies to take into account when legislators, OSPI or the State Board of Education, considers adding new initiatives.

An unintended consequence of not having a state-wide, K-12 planning system, or a single agency overall responsible for the planning , implementation and integration of **ALL** initiatives, is an unmanageable and unreasonable workload within school districts. The present system for planning and resourcing state-wide initiatives isn't apparent, and the current planning and implementation methods are neither effective nor efficient. Already overtaxed school districts are using energy they can't afford to expend to react to state directed changes. It requires an even higher level of organizational energy to keep pace with state initiatives that are not well planned or fully resourced. Planning inefficiencies within the K-12 system generate increased workload, at the classroom, school and school district levels. In turn, increasing workload is harmful to staff morale, and ultimately and most importantly negatively impacts student achievement.

Absent a single controlling agency at the state level that has visibility of the total impact and number of requirements levied on school districts, and a well coordinated multi-year plan detailing priorities and future initiatives, scarce state and local resources will not be fully leveraged. In order to maximize student achievement, school improvement plans must nest under or support school district improvement plans, and school district plans must nest under state plans. Having a clear set of goals, priorities and a detailed multi-year plan at the school district level, isn't helpful when the state mandates new initiatives inside the school district's already completed plans. The number of state directed initiatives already exceeds the organizational capacity of school districts.

A recent example of a state-level decision that was inside already completed school district plans involves the implementation of the new performance expectations for mathematics. A decision was made by the state during the spring 2008 to assess elementary students in March, 2010 using the new math performance expectations. In order to prepare students and staff for a March 2010 assessment, work for this transition should have started not later than the fall of 2006. In the spring of 2008, district and school improvement plans for school year 08-09 were already complete, and the preliminary school district budget in support of these plans was being finalized.

With the understanding that new math performance expectations were not available until early 2008, detailed planning could not have started any sooner. However, the state's implementation timeline for the new math assessment should not have been set any earlier than 2012. The additional two years would have allowed time to properly plan a comprehensive transition to include the alignment of all resources.

The alignment of all resources includes staff and administrator professional development, implementation of either new curriculum or supplemental materials, communication with parents and community members, and the allocation of dollars to support a multi-year transition plan. Recognizing that the new math performance expectations will better prepare our students, most school districts would have likely and informally integrated the new standards in the curriculum as soon as possible. Formally assessing students in the spring of 2012 would not have precluded students learning new material as soon as school districts were able to do so! However, formal assessment at the state level beginning in 2012 would have been a very effective way to better control the growing workload within school districts, provide a more inclusive planning approach, and better align our state and school district fiscal processes.

In a resource constrained environment, it becomes even more imperative that a state-wide planning system is in place and there is a single agency/leader responsible for planning, integrating, and implementing all state and federal mandates. A state-wide system must address how the State Legislature, OSPI, the State Board of Education, and other state agencies meld what may appear to be singularly helpful initiatives into effective plans that advance student achievement throughout the state. Of all the many improvements that could be made throughout our K-12 continuum, this improvement is a relatively low cost measure (perhaps even a cost savings) that will positively support school districts, resulting in enhanced student success. Leaving no child behind, and a

passion for immediate change, can't become an excuse for a lack of planning and coordination, and a continuing series of rapidly implemented initiatives.

Recommended Solutions

1. **Designate one state agency/office (and executive level leader) responsible for the planning and integration of ALL state and federal K-12 education reform related initiatives.**

2. **Appropriately resource the designated agency with the individual expertise to plan, coordinate, implement and synchronize all initiatives generated by every state level agency that will ultimately impact school districts.**

3. **Create a state-level, K-12 education planning system that covers short and long range initiatives that will directly impact school districts. Short range planning is defined as anytime within the upcoming biennium. Mid range planning is the next biennium and long range planning is the third biennium. (short range 2009-11, long range 2013-15)**

4. **Prohibit the expected implementation of any state level initiative less than 24 months from the time school districts receive a directive for implementation.**

5. **Prohibit any decision by the legislative body to provide funding for any new initiatives without proof that the new initiative can be implemented by school districts in the context of ongoing and future initiatives.**

6. **After a state level planning system is designed, include the system details as part of the required curriculum at the State's K-12 Leadership Academy.**

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