

Rural School Leadership in the Deep South

A Framework for
Professional
Development



Doris Terry Williams and Jereann King

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This publication was made possible by a Ventures in Leadership grant from the Wallace Readers' Digest Funds.

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The Rural School and Community Trust is a national nonprofit organization rooted in rural America. The Trust works with a network of schools and community groups striving to improve the quality of education and community life and to improve state policy on education. We work across the nation but especially in those rural places distressed by historic patterns of poverty and racism or stressed by declines in population, major changes in population composition and fundamental economic change.

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A Framework for Professional Development

By Doris Terry Williams and Jereann King



Acknowledgements

This work is the collective thinking of a truly dedicated group of school leaders in the Delta and Black Belt regions of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi who came together as the Rural School Leaders Working Group of the Rural School and Community Trust to discuss the challenges and opportunities for school leadership within their regions. We extend special thanks to Daisy Slan and Doris Smith for assisting us in forming the Working Group and in planning the work session out of which this report was drawn. Members of the Rural School Leaders Working Group include:

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Introduction

In March 2002, the Rural School and Community Trust brought together 18 rural school principals and superintendents from the Delta and Black Belt regions of the southern United States to participate in the Ventures in Leadership Project.¹ At that first meeting, this Rural School Leaders Working Group (RSLWG) identified and examined challenges to providing educational excellence—recruitment and retention of qualified teachers and administrators, low expectations for student achievement and educator performance, and the growing gap between communities and schools. The school leaders also reflected on the history of education in the Deep South and how that history continues to influence the teaching and learning environments.

School leaders' perspectives and experiences, and school district statistical profiles, colored by the complexity of race and poverty in a rural setting, were compiled in a report entitled *Rural School Leadership in the Deep South: The Double-Edged Legacy of School Desegregation*.² The report outlined what participants consider the most important topic areas for their personal learning and professional development, and what they indicated they need to lead school districts to greater student achievement and overall school performance.

This group of school leaders met for a second time in October 2002 to outline the features of a practitioner-led, research oriented professional development plan to strengthen

their capacity to meet the critical challenges and opportunities of rural school leadership. This current document is a summary of presentations and outcomes of the second meeting. It begins with a close look at one superintendent's experience with and response to the challenges of leading a rural school district in which many of the classic negative indicators (low resources, high teacher turnover, and low student performance) existed. It explores the critical need for communities to revisit the purposes of education, especially in light of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* and other high-stakes test driven accountability regulations. It also offers the perspectives of university-based teacher education faculty members, and outlines a practitioner-led professional development plan for school leaders in the Deep South.

¹ Ventures in Leadership, a project of The Rural School and Community Trust, is funded by the Wallace Readers' Digest Funds Ventures in Leadership Initiative.

² *Rural School Leadership in the Deep South: The Double-Edged Legacy of School Desegregation*, authored by Doris Terry Williams and Jereann King, is available at www.ruraledu.org/publications.html.

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The Case of a Rural Superintendent

Warren County sits on 424 square miles of gently rolling hills, open pasturelands and rapidly disappearing woodlands in the north central Piedmont region of North Carolina. In 1728, explorer William Byrd called it “the Land of Eden.” The county has a rich heritage, largely rooted in a tobacco plantation system in which slaves accounted for more than 68% of the population. In the years following the Civil War, slavery as it had been known was replaced by a tenant farming system that still kept the county’s majority population enslaved to the land. Many were able to escape the system, some to become local land holders themselves but many more to pursue better opportunities in the North. In 1968, Civil Rights leader and developer Floyd B. McKissick, Sr., came into the county to start a bold new economic venture, the Soul City new town development. At that time, the place that had once been heralded as a center of culture, wealth and influence boasted crippling rates of poverty and illiteracy borne of intentional neglect and deliberate underdevelopment.

For the next 20 years, county leaders would be plagued by the struggles of the descendants of former slaves, united with Northern pioneers and indigenous Natives, to gain control of the county’s notoriously low-performing school system. By 1984, African Americans, now making up more than 70% of the population, held a majority on the five-member Board of Education. Native Americans (5% of the population) controlled one seat and Caucasians the other. Resolute in its quest for vastly improved schools, the Board hired the system’s first African American superintendent in 1988. Over the next seven years, there would be three other superintendents and just as many interims. Despite the leadership turnovers, the unwelcome winds of change had begun to blow and noticeable improvements were being made.

In 1995, the Board of Education hired the system’s first female superintendent, Dr. Carlinda Purcell, then an assistant superintendent for a large urban system in central North Carolina. She worked in the position until her resignation in 2002. Though improved, the Warren County system was still low-performing and was under pressure to make considerable gains under the State’s new accountability system. Acknowledging that her leadership style and personality were problematic, Dr. Purcell spoke passionately with rural school leaders about both her “accomplishments” and her “demise” in Warren County, giving voice to the difficulties of leading school change in “hard” places.

Before interviewing for the job as superintendent of Warren County Schools, Carlinda Purcell studied the district’s performance history and demographics for implications for leading a rural, low-resource school district. She began crafting a change agenda and moved quickly in the early stages of her tenure to implement it. Despite the fact that the sitting Board of Education was fully supportive and united in its resolve to make substantial improvements over a relatively short period of time, she met overwhelming

resistance that would be overcome through perseverance and a stubborn commitment to stay focused on what was believed to be in the best interests of children.

In the face of the nearly debilitating, self-perpetuating challenges of a rural school district like Warren County, how would Carlinda Purcell’s leadership contribute to school improvement and overall student achievement? What was most important? Where would she begin? She settled on the following:

- Having a clear vision
- Communicating that vision throughout the community
- Aligning professional development activities with the needs of school personnel and the vision
- Raising the achievement levels of all students
- Recruiting and retaining effective teachers
- Partnering with other organizations and foundations to generate support and resources for best practices for school innovations

Creating the Vision

Dr. Purcell began the visioning process with a survey of school personnel. She asked five basic questions:

1. What is good about our school district?
2. What do we need to work on to improve?
3. What is perceived to be broken, but really does not need to be fixed?
4. What professional development do you need to do your job better?
5. What is it that I can do to help you get your job done?

Data collected from this survey were analyzed and presented to the school board during a strategic planning retreat in the spring of 1996. At that time the board adopted or reaffirmed the following goals:

- Increase student achievement
- Provide a rigorous and challenging curriculum
- Provide a safe and orderly school environment
- Provide quality professional development for school personnel *and* board members

A subsequent board and staff retreat helped to clarify the goals and examined beliefs and strategies for reaching them.

Spreading the Vision

With a clear mandate from the Board, Dr. Purcell set out to spread the vision for Warren County Schools throughout the community. She hosted a series of community forums in which she introduced herself, the board's vision and goals, and her ideas for reaching the goals, all the time stressing the importance of parent and community involvement.

The next step was to inform elected officials and other community leaders about the vision and to get their buy-in and support. An Elected Officials Day brought many of them into the schools to teach or talk with students about a variety of topics. Luncheon meetings with local officials, PTA presidents, civic and religious leaders and other community members were all aimed at sharing what was happening in the schools and the range of school needs.

Aligning Professional Development

Armed with her assessment of the staff's strengths and weaknesses and a well-articulated vision, Dr. Purcell insisted on full participation in an array of carefully selected professional development activities that were aligned with individual needs and system goals. Principals were expected to participate in teacher development activities to demonstrate their support for new learning and teaching practices.

A newly established Winter Academy offered a full menu of workshops and other opportunities to meet the expressed interests and needs of the staff. Featured speakers were the superintendent's choice and were often selected because of their rural roots in addition to their expertise. A teacher mentor program guided and supported new teachers and helped them feel connected to a community of experienced educators.

Raising the Achievement Levels of All Students

Dr. Purcell's leadership style, her chosen strategies for improvement, and the demands of higher expectations for staff performance met with open resistance from her staff. In an administrative staff retreat, they worked through some of the conflict, studied the board-adopted goals, and began the difficult task of raising student achievement. Dr. Purcell invited to the retreat superintendents from other school districts that were beginning to have some success with the North Carolina accountability model and credits them with conveying the message of change that brought about a new mindset among administrators.

Keeping the public and workplace conversation focused on education and students, on teaching and learning, was critical to improving academic achievement. With resistance to many of the changes she wanted to make, Dr. Purcell found it difficult to stay focused. Her decision to reassign principals raised community ire and resulted in a court battle within the first year of her tenure. The court ruled in her favor, sparking a number of resignations and early retirements.

Keeping teachers, administrators, parents and community members informed about and focused on the State's accountability program was also considered critical to improving student performance. The board committed extensive financial resources to contract with an outside vendor to align various components of the system's curriculum with the State's Standard Course of Study. The Central office staff was commissioned to take the message to schools to ensure that principals knew what was expected of them, and that teachers had the information they needed to become more effective. Invited speakers united their voices with the Board's and with Dr. Purcell's to promote high achievement.

Recognizing its primary legal *raison d'être*, the board engaged in a series of intensive, consultant facilitated work sessions to rewrite and codify its policy manual, adopting new policies where necessary to support the new vision, and deleting those that impeded it or were too ambiguous to enforce.

Recruiting and Retaining Effective Teachers

What do you offer teachers to come to a rural school district like Warren County? Responding to the challenge of recruiting teachers, Dr. Purcell was quick to highlight the good things about the school district: the wonderful state-of-the-art school facilities, the access to computer technology in classrooms, and the benefits of working in small schools with really great children.

To ensure that prospective teachers were good matches for the school district, Dr. Purcell personally interviewed candidates after principals screened them and before they were presented to the school board for employment. With the teacher shortage, she wanted to poise the county to get the best and most qualified teachers, and she personally wanted to know who was going into the classrooms. She asked candidates to talk about their rewarding and challenging experiences with children and their approach to creating student-centered classroom environments. She presented them a profile of the county, identifying the demographics, economic conditions, and educational levels, and engaged potential teachers around their ideas for involving parents in their children's learning. She also wanted to know if they felt well prepared by their university training. Cited shortcomings became the focus for novice teacher professional development.

Partnering for Support and Resources

Dr. Purcell was painfully aware that accomplishing the system's goals within the

context of the challenges she had inherited would require supplemental funding from external sources. She launched a campaign to obtain them, netting a host of collaborative ventures, special initiatives, and grants from public and private sources.

To entice new teachers to the district, she obtained funding for an Incentives for Supporting and Sustaining Teachers (ISS) initiative, which paid utility connection charges and other costs associated with relocating to the county. Project BEST (Building Educators for Successful Teaching) supported an industrial specialist to mentor new teachers. At the high school level, a new course targeted young people who wanted to enter the teaching profession. Membership in the five-district Roanoke River Valley Consortium resulted in substantial funding for curriculum innovations, particularly in mathematics and the sciences. Other partnerships focused on leadership for excellence and achievement.

The Achievements and Demise of a Rural Superintendent

Dr. Purcell proudly shares a graph depicting increases in student achievement levels over the course of her tenure. She highlights the considerable increase in test scores and the all-but-closed performance gap across ethnic groups. Only one of the school district's six schools remained on the State's low-performing schools list.

A second graph shows achievement levels at the end of Dr. Purcell's tenure, with startling drops in performance by African American students in particular. "This," she notes, "is when the conversation shifted away from students and school performance to conversations about Carlinda Purcell."

With a reconstituted and far less supportive school board, teachers and administrators

reverted to their previous attitudes and practices. Purcell reflects:

...One of the true signs of leadership is knowing when one must remove themselves for the good of the whole, lest all is lost. I did not want the conversation in Warren County, where the children so desperately need leadership and vision, to get lost on Carlinda Purcell, where board members had personality concerns and not real issues of education and quality service to children.

What We Learned

The case of Dr. Carlinda Purcell as superintendent of Warren County Schools offers numerous insights for school leadership, and for the role of the school leader as a change agent.

1. Leaders, especially when coming from the outside and with a change agenda, need to understand how change happens and to be able to influence a community's social and political networks. They must understand the web of interpersonal relationships and negotiate them in ways that remove both the leader and the relationships as change inhibitors.
2. How much time can a leader devote to getting "everyone on board" in the press for immediate change? No matter how noble the cause, leaders cannot simply ignore their constituents in pursuit of a goal. Success, even on widely accepted indicators, does not trump strong and respected ties to the community. Building and nurturing those ties is a continuous process.
3. Few things are more important to whole-system change than a clearly articulated vision. That vision, and the plan to actualize it, should be crafted with broad-

based school, community, youth and parental participation. At the least, it must be understood and supported by every sector and across diverse stakeholder groups throughout the community.

4. Focus is essential to raising and maintaining student and staff performance. The curriculum, professional development activities, and resource allocations must be aligned with and centered on clearly stated and broadly disseminated goals that support the accomplishment of the vision.
5. Without deliberate and monitored focus on improving outcomes and raising the

achievement levels of *all* students, children of color tend to suffer most.

An Afterthought

Unfortunately, in Warren County, recognition of Carlinda Purcell's achievements and respect for her and her innovations came too late. In June 2002, she resigned her position and accepted an appointment as assistant superintendent of Cumberland County Schools in Fayetteville, North Carolina. As this report went to press, the Board of Education had not been able to fill her position on a permanent basis.

Leading Change to Achieve Broader Purposes of Education

In poor communities of color, the negative aspects of rural education are exacerbated, making it more difficult for their school districts to meet state accountability standards. In the Deep South, the issues are even more pronounced due to the legacy of political disenfranchisement, economic repression and racial segregation. Added to this situation are the current demands of the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. The legislation mandates tough rules that even some "good" schools resist, and many that both good and failing schools will find challenging at best. In many places where providing a good education for all students is already a major challenge, NCLB is a farce and the effort to meet its requirements is often perceived as "playing the game."

In the words of one rural superintendent speaking specifically about poor and African American schools, "We have always known there were two games in town." The goal of the first "game" is survival. Today, that means meeting the required accountability standards so as to remain a player in public education. The second "game" views the purposes of education much more broadly than meeting certain externally imposed standards. It is about providing young people an education that purposefully connects to understanding and solving community issues as well as helping them to be better prepared as citizens and contributing community members.

The role of school leadership shifts drastically when multiple purposes of education are considered. How does one go about articulating the differences and creating a vision that accounts for distinct purposes for education in mostly African American and poor school districts? What evidence supports the need for a dual approach? In her analysis of this challenge, Dr. Doris Terry Williams sees a critical opportunity for school leaders to analyze the broader implications of NCLB and to recognize the underlying characteristics of education that empowers students to be independent thinkers. The following are excerpts from the first part of Dr. Williams' presentation to the Ventures in Leadership participants.

I have heard a lot here about the issues and challenges raised by No Child Left Behind and the resources needed to help schools meet the national standards. I have heard that standards are not going away, that we must figure out how to survive within the context that has been set for us and that survival is an issue of major concern among you.

Over the years, we have come to take for granted that there will always be good *public* schools for our children and that these schools will have good teachers who have been prepared in good, college-based teacher education programs. But nothing that we have taken for granted in the past is guaranteed for the future. Indeed, the very survival of public education is on the line, and, even more so, the survival of people of color and poverty within the public school system.

This brings me to your earlier assertion, that "there are really two games in town." Game number one is the "testing game," the object of which is to raise test scores for increasing percentages of students. This game is immensely important because it is *truly* a game of survival. It threatens the survival of public education in many of our places, and of the many children of color and poverty who do not perform well on standardized tests.

The second game, like the first, is also a game of survival. It speaks, though, to a broader purpose of education, to connecting education to community problems and issues, to preparing young people to be fully functioning and contributing citizens of community. It is a survival issue of a different sort--not how are we going to stay in the game of public education, but how are we

going to put education in the service of our community and our needs? So, at the heart of the second game is the very *purpose of education in community*. In both of these games, we need standards. But we must ask the questions: Whose standards? For what purpose? and Is that purpose consistent with what we believe to be the purpose of education in our community?

I make a distinction between community and society in this context. There is, as we know, a grand scheme around education in the United States that is connected to the notion of a global society, a global economy. Given that, the purpose of education in society becomes clear. In the same vein, rampant consolidation and externally imposed standards have diminished the presence and potential impact of schools in community so that education is no longer in the service of the places where schools exist, but of the globalized business- and industrial-led community. All of this is embodied in No Child Left Behind and is a part of that first game. I believe that, ultimately, what we are about here is the second game.

I often hear school leaders ask: How do I get my teachers motivated and on track to do what I want them to do? Probing more deeply one might ask: “What do you want them to do?” Is the underlying question, “How do I get my teachers to get these kids to pass this test and meet these state and national standards and competencies?” Or is it, “How do I get them to facilitate the kind of learning that these kids need to be fully functioning, contributing, self-directing citizens in whatever place they choose?”

How one frames the question reveals his or her focus. Some will say to you, “You have to get the test scores up first so you can stay in the game. Then you can focus on those other goals and purposes.” I believe we have to do both, and we have to do them both right now.

The language, and perhaps even the intent, of No Child Left Behind are appropriate. We cannot argue with a federal or state government that says we need highly qualified teachers in every classroom. But when they say to a Title I school you have to get it done right now—this year—that changes the picture. Who are the Title I schools? They are the hardest to staff in the first place. Why is it that the timeframe for them is right now, and the timeframe for others is further out?

Another way of understanding the issue is to think of two tracks: track one focuses on meeting state and national testing standards mandated by No Child Left Behind, and track two on accomplishing the broader purpose of education. In track one, I want teachers to get test scores up to meet the standards, and in track two, I want to get teachers motivated, equipped and teaching to accomplish the broader purpose of education in our community.

In your first meeting, you articulated a vision of education that would equip young people to be not just consumers but producers of goods. That vision reflects a different purpose for education than what we see in track one. This first game has in many ways been a diversion in that it forces us into a survival mode that takes the focus off and the conversation away from what we believe should be the purpose of education in our community. Are we using the schooling process merely to train people to serve a global economy, or are we using it to serve our communities as well?

Then the question becomes, “If I accomplish the goals of this first track, that is, if I get my test scores up, have I accomplished the goals of the second one as well?” It *is* high stakes and I know that. Teachers, administrators, even higher education people—all of us are focused on track one because we know that this game is real.

So, in our school districts and classrooms, we narrowly interpret the standards such that in some instances we are teaching to the test. I have heard teachers and school leaders say, “Yes, I got my test scores up, but my kids are learning less.” Why are they learning less? It is because we are focusing on the test and getting the test scores up and not on the broader purpose of education. When we talk about preparing students to be producers and owners as opposed to consumers, we are talking about a more emancipating, a more liberating kind of practice. So again, what is the real question? If we accomplish this first track and get the scores up, have we also met what you have said is the broader goal for education and for the kinds of students you want to produce? I, quite frankly, think not.

Conversely we can ask, “If we accomplish this broader purpose (track two) have we then also accomplished the first?” I believe, and an abundance of evidence shows, that if we accomplish the goals of the broader purpose track, then we have also accomplished the goals of the first track. However, if we set our eyes on the first track only, we are not going to accomplish the second one.

Action Research as a Problem-Solving Strategy

Dr. Williams’ analysis raises new questions about the knowledge and skills necessary for leaders who want their school districts to accomplish the broader purposes of education. Accomplishing these broader purposes raises new questions about the role of higher education in preparing teachers and administrators. What do school leaders need to know and be able to do to lead change that addresses the broader purposes of education? What are the implications for their and their teachers’ professional development? How can school leaders have access to professional development that meets their specific needs? In another part of her speech, Dr. Williams explains why action research is an effective way to generate new knowledge and succeed with problem solving.

In your earlier meeting, you talked about your professional development needs. One of the things that I heard, and that I hear often, is that there is no shortage of professional development opportunities for school leaders; higher education institutions offer many opportunities for practitioners. But what I also heard and continue to hear is a need for professional development that is immediately accessible in your place and directly linked to your specific issues. I have heard you say, “I don’t need to wait six months for a scheduled professional development activity over there when I have an immediate need right now, that might even be unique to my place. How do I get that need addressed?”

Many of the issues, the challenges, the professional development needs that we have talked about are within our power to address and to resolve in our place, in our context, by connecting and partnering with others. I doubt that higher education is ever going to be able to speak to your individual needs. They serve a fairly big constituency of schools where they are, but you can take the lead and partner with them, and with others, to get your immediate issues resolved.

This brings me to practitioner-led or action research. Greenwood and Levin define action research as –

... social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organization or community seeking to improve their situation. Action research promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders.⁵

⁵ Greenwood, Davydd J. and Morten Levin. (1998). *Introduction to Action Research*. London: SAGE Publications. p. 4

It assumes that you know what the question is in your place and that there are people around you who can help clarify and collect data about that question so that the entire burden is not on you individually. It is a participatory process that gets others, especially key stakeholders, involved in defining the problem, in collecting data around it, and in using the data to craft a solution.

I am told that “he who gets to ask the question gets to change the institution.” Creating the forum and the climate for people to ask their question, to do the research around it, to develop some action as a result of their research findings, and to come back and reflect on that action, is not to be taken lightly or done haphazardly.

The test of the validity of action research is whether or not it solved the problem. It is not like attending a professional development activity, completing an evaluation form and returning to your institution saying it was enjoyable or that it spoke to needs; that is not the test. The *real* test is whether it solved your problem.

Action research is context bound and addresses real-life problems; it addresses the problems that you are having right now. It is a problem defined by your team—your teachers, community folk, and higher education partners—a team. It is specific to the real-life problems that you are having because it is *your question* and not somebody else’s, and it is *directly related to your work*.

Essential to action research is that the research itself is participatory and that it is action oriented. If it is not participatory and action oriented, then it is not action research.

Dr. Williams makes a case for using action research as a professional development method because it is an empowering process, a knowledge generating process and is parallel with emancipatory teaching and learning. At the root of her comments is the notion of transformational learning, learning that produces change and shapes people and situations.

How do school leaders learn how to use and help others to use action research? Can higher education and teacher training programs assist in this type of professional development for school leaders and teachers? Are higher education institutions responding to the need for leaders and teachers who can effectively address high stakes accountability mandates as well as respond to multiple educational purposes?

In the next section of this document, some of these questions are addressed as we reflect on an earlier debate on the purposes of education and examine from the personal perspectives of those working in institutions of higher education exactly what these institutions are contributing and might contribute in the future.

Williams defines “emancipatory” education as that which “facilitates interdisciplinary learning in ways that are liberating rather than domesticating, such that students, regardless of ability or background, feel a sense of ownership and control of their learning, are encouraged and supported in the inquiry process, and have high expectations for their own ability to learn and to apply the disciplines in the real world. It provides students the means to change their circumstances, to become informed and contributing citizens in their place, to unshackle their minds and lift their spirits.”

Professional Development and the Role of Higher Education Institutions

Questions about the purposes of education have prompted debate since the beginning of the common school and public education movement in American society. The responses to these questions were and are still complicated by historical, political and economic factors. Would education serve for industrial advancement, democratic and civic participation, religious growth, moral development, socialization, or domestication? Who would receive an education? Would it be males, children of landowners, new immigrants? Would enslaved and freed Africans receive an education? Who would decide?

Of particular relevance to contemporary African American school leaders is the historical period following the Civil War, during Reconstruction, when for African Americans education was viewed as the key to freedom. Historian James D. Anderson states:

The black teachers, school officials, and secular and religious leaders who formed the vanguard of the postwar common school movement insisted that the ex-slaves must educate themselves, gather experience, and acquire a responsible awareness of the duties incumbent upon them as citizens and as male voters in the new social order. Their thinking on these questions indicated virtually no illusions about the power of schooling to ameliorate fundamental economic inequalities. Rather, it reflected their belief that education could help raise the freed people to an appreciation of their historic responsibility to develop a better society and that any significant reorganization of the southern political economy was indissolubly linked to their education and

the principles, duties, and obligations appropriate to a democratic social order.⁴

How and where would these ex-slaves receive this education? Who would teach them? How would the teachers themselves be trained? The Hampton normal school model of industrial education dominated teacher training from 1869 to 1915. Hampton's mission was to train common school teachers for the South's Black educational system. Surrounding this model was the bitter struggle around the purpose of education—education to maintain an inferior social status for Blacks or education that challenged the inequalities of wealth and power.

The controversy around the purpose of education continues even today as school leaders and higher education programs examine the implications of the new No Child Left Behind legislation. How are higher education institutions preparing school administrators for the challenges of meeting high stakes accountability mandates? What do schools of education currently provide in undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education programs that respond to the special needs of rural school leaders? What do schools of education provide to support rural Delta and Black Belt school leaders to be better able to respond to rural and low-resource school district issues, including understanding and addressing the broader purposes of education?

These were some of the questions that guided a presentation by three representatives from higher education institutions in the Delta and Black Belt regions. The panelists stressed the

⁴ Anderson, James. (1988). *The education of blacks in the South, 160-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

need for closer relationships between school districts and higher education institutions. They want to see universities and colleges as places to instill *hope* in future teachers and leaders and to build a shared vision—one that is broader than that mandated in No Child Left Behind. They discussed the need for professional development that is responsive to the real issues and concerns of leaders and is not fragmented and isolated from improving school performance.

A Shared Vision for Education

Often when school leaders talk about shared vision, they mean a consensus or common understanding among teachers, parents, and community members about what education should offer, its goals and objectives, and expected outcomes. Oftentimes the role and purpose of education does not extend beyond an understanding of meeting certain general requirements, passing students from grade to grade, graduating them from high school, and in some instances preparing them for college or work. Rarely are the views of higher education or local universities and colleges meshed into this formula and considered as part of a shared vision. The reverse is true for institutions of higher education. These institutions play very little if any role in building consensus on the purposes of education in local communities.

Ingrad Smith, Assistant Professor of educational leadership at Mississippi State University, believes vision is a critical aspect of public education and that oftentimes the vision is administratively driven and not shared by teachers, students and community members.

There is a need for a shared vision.... There is a need for taking time to sell the vision to parents, that they should take time to participate in their child's education. I think that is what has been left behind. I think not only will the

children be left behind, the families, communities and whole systems of education, including higher education, will be left behind. For me I have a real simple way of defining vision: see it the way it is, see it the way you want it to be, and make it that way. Someone looked at this community and saw it the way it is and then they made a decision to see it how they wanted it to be. No Child Left Behind is the instrument they are using to make it that way. In short, vision for me is everything because No Child Left Behind is the result of somebody's vision, it is the result of somebody's shared vision, and we didn't share in the creation of the vision.

The higher education panel participants noted that colleges and universities in the Delta and Black Belt should emphasize and teach visioning and strategic planning for future and current school leaders. The panelists also recognized the need for higher education institutions to build consensus around their own visions of the purposes of education as opposed to simply being victims themselves of teaching to the test, in hopes of increasing the rates at which graduates pass teacher licensure exams.

Arma Hart, Dean of Teacher Education at Arkansas Baptist College, sees a need for college-level programs to make their own missions explicit, especially to the growing number of adjunct professors on whom they rely for teaching teacher and administrator preparation courses.

Part of the problem is we are our worst enemy. At the college level we have teachers who are adjuncts, who have not been in classrooms for so long. We say that this is our mission in this department, but when our adjuncts come on, we do not involve them. Some of them are retired not only from the school system, but from life.... We expect our students

to model what they see and they are not seeing a lot. So we need to have a vision and we need to...make sure that when we develop those conceptual frameworks, we need to make it real.... We can do that on the college level.

Cultural Sensitivity and the Minority Presence in the Teaching Profession

A major concern of the panelists is the dwindling numbers of African American teachers entering the teaching profession. The decline in African American teachers has had a ripple effect on teaching and learning environments in rural Delta and Black Belt communities, especially around cultural sensitivity and identifying and responding to various learning styles. The shortage of African American teachers is directly tied to their enrollment in and completion of teacher training programs. Arma Hart feels that the vision must include African American teachers going through traditional teacher education programs, which she sees as vital to their success in school. However, many of the programs in which they land, like public schools, are simply teaching to the tests.

I know we have teachers going through alternative programs because of the shortage of teachers. However, when you go through a teacher education program, this prepares you...to teach students, not only for content. I've done some training for the State department [of education], helping student teachers who are going through alternative certification. The only thing we can do is give them a little bit of something. They don't get it like going through a teacher education program.

Ms. Hart also links the decline in African American teachers to early retirement, attitudes about test taking, and higher certification requirements.

We had more African American teachers who were out there teaching in the schools before they came up with higher cut-off scores [for certification]. This was in the 1980s. And because some of us have this mindset that we can't pass the test and we can't brush up on test taking skills, some of us retired early, and because of the aging African American teachers, we are losing even more. So we have to do all we can to get these kids into education.

The discussion about the decline of African American teachers is linked to the assumption that there is some correlation between the success of African American students and the presence of African American teachers and administrators in their schools—that African American educators understand and are more empathetic to the special challenges of meeting the needs of African American youth. So, with the decline of African American practitioners there is an even greater need to prepare *all* administrators and teachers to understand and respond to the special challenges of African American and other children of color and poverty.

Bearers of Hope

Hyacinth Findlay of Alabama State University feels that a significant part of the vision must focus on university teacher and administrator training programs helping future teachers and leaders understand that they are the bearers of hope.

We have a lot of teachers who come out of college and discover they have been taught according to what tradition says and when they get into communities they find a different set of circumstances. Universities and colleges have to train teachers and show them that it is essential not to give up on our children, but to always send a message of hope or it will

be a hopeless society. In our colleges of education, in the undergraduate training, we need to do more with our students, more than just the standards. Our students have to be on a mission.

In short, higher education teacher and administrator training programs play a critical role in transforming and shaping a vision for education that is responsive to the challenges of improving student achievement and school performance in the context of accomplishing the broader purposes of education.

Practitioner Led Professional Development

There is no question that higher education institutions in the South have contributed to the professional development of public school practitioners. However, more needs to be done to support local school districts to meet the demands of new accountability and performance standards. First, higher education programs can revise courses to help future teachers learn how to design and plan curricula aligned with state benchmarks. Second, they can make themselves available to design special courses to meet the specific needs of school districts.

As for action research or practitioner led research, which could give practitioners frameworks and flexibility to address and solve problems specific to the district, the panel participants suggested that regional university and college training programs could provide more courses and teacher internships involving concepts and experience with action research. This would require universities and local school districts to create and sustain more substantial, ongoing partnerships. North Carolina's state-funded University-School Partnerships for Teacher Education (USTEP) is a successful statewide model for such partnerships.

Higher education institutions are at an important juncture in terms of their own pedagogical frames of reference. The transformative teaching and learning necessary for meeting the dual challenges of education is the same transformative process that higher education institutions will need to practice and foster in their training programs. To institutionalize and promote these kinds of changes, universities and colleges would, as Jack Mezirow, a leading theorist in transformative learning, suggests:

... be an empathic provocateur; it also means to serve as a role model for critical reflection and the ethical idea of caring and to serve as a committed co-learner and occasional guide in the exciting journey of transformative learning."⁵

Teacher and administrator training programs based in higher education institutions, which take on new and different roles, and in partnership with local school districts, can become the role models for change and help to shape the vision for education that goes far beyond current test-driven accountability standards to education that produces critical and independent thinkers.

⁵ Mezirow, Jack (1990) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*, p. 365. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Leadership for Change: A Plan for Professional Development

The call for educational systems that produce critical thinkers and good citizens while meeting high-stakes accountability measures increases the demand for highly effective leaders. However, school leaders and leadership development do not exist in a vacuum. What leaders learn and need to do is aligned with and connected to a larger vision of education, power, and societal interests.

If rural Delta and Black Belt school leaders are to step out of the traditional educational arena into one that suggests broader educational goals, then they will need skills that include understanding and knowing how to lead a process that changes the system itself. This kind of change is very different from that which occurs within a system which itself remains unchanged.⁶ The knowledge and skills associated with systemic change go far beyond those necessary for maintaining a system status quo.

For example, to change systemically, educational leaders must understand the underlying conditions and the relations between the school organization and the surrounding environment. They must understand what they are changing and the roles that must be coordinated if change is to succeed.⁷ Because these leaders are promoting innovations in educational attitudes and practices, they are considered to be change agents.

⁶Watzlawick, Paul; Weakland, John; and Fisch, Richard (1974). *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

⁷Kanter, Rosabeth M., Stein, Barry a., Jick, Todd D. (1992). New York: Free Press

This section of the document reports on what school leaders deem necessary to address broader educational goals and an action research oriented professional development strategy for those who will make at least a three-year commitment to engage in a change process.

Areas of Need

When asked about topics or areas in which they needed to have more knowledge and greater skills in order to meet the challenges stated above, Rural School Leaders Working Group participants generated a list from which four themes emerged.

- Student achievement
- Community connections and growth
- Systems management
- Teacher development and growth

Participants were asked to think about what they personally needed in terms of leadership skills required to meet the challenges and accomplish broader educational goals in the four stated areas.

Student Achievement

No Child Left Behind and other accountability initiatives focus on student achievement, defined in terms of standardized test scores, more than any other aspect of school improvement. Meeting participants expanded the definition of student achievement to mean preparation for productive citizenship. Such preparation would include mastery of

- Basic competencies (reading, mathematics, writing, speaking and listening)
- Local, state and national standards
- Technology (basic and higher level uses)

- Global competencies
- Economic and political systems

Professional Development Needs of Leaders

Professional development needs of leaders with respect to student achievement include

- Identifying what students need to know to fulfill their roles as citizens
- Integrating and aligning relevant content with state curricula frameworks
- Assessing individual student needs
- Structuring instruction for maximum student learning
- Using assessment to guide instruction
- Creating a climate for inquiry-based teaching and learning
- Communicating high expectations and directions towards achieving them to the community

Community Connections and Growth

Connection to and participation in the growth of the community are vital to the school leadership role. Similarly, students should be able to function effectively in the civic, economic, political and social lives of their community, or of any community in which they choose to live. Key to the leaders' ability to connect with community are cultural knowledge and sensitivity; a functional knowledge of issues of oppression, white privilege and poverty; and the ability to collaborate effectively across diverse stakeholder groups.

Professional Development Needs of Leaders

The areas of professional development need for leaders with respect to community connections and growth include

- Building consensus
- Visioning with and within the context of community

- Identifying and working with formal and non-formal leaders
- Facilitating diverse stakeholder groups
- Understanding the local context (history, culture, economy) and its implications for school success
- Sharing power

In the words of one participant:

We need to have skills to identify community leaders and resources within the community. We need to know how to build good partnerships with community people. [This means] parents, community leaders and other[s]. We also need to know how to share the power because sometimes we think we have all of the power and we control everything and that's not always true. And that does not always get to the purpose for education.

Even though oppression, white privilege, and poverty were listed as part of community connections and growth, the group did not list specific skills required to address those issues. This would suggest that school leaders need a great deal of help in this area—help to formulate the questions and raise them in appropriate forums; help to unpack the issues to get to the root causes; help to dispel age-old myths and fears.

Systems Management

A key function of the school leader is managing systems that support teaching and learning.

Professional Development Needs of Leaders

The professional development needs of leaders with respect to systems management include

- Resource development in support of a shared vision

- Fiscal management and responsibility
- Personnel management
- Data driven decision-making
- Time management
- School structure (day and calendar)
- Change management

Teacher Development and Growth

To accomplish broader educational goals, leaders must be able to recruit and retain teachers who can meet students' needs culturally, socially, academically, and emotionally. They must be able to energize, mobilize and support existing teachers around a shared vision that reflects high expectations of both students and staff, and to provide a supportive and helping environment that values this kind of teacher.

Professional Development Needs of Leaders

The professional development needs of leaders with respect to teacher development and growth include strategies for

- Recruiting and retaining teachers
- Supporting new teachers during the induction phase of their career
- Observing, evaluating and giving feedback for teacher growth and development
- Providing professional development to meet individual and school-wide needs
- Identifying and aligning professional development opportunities with individual and school-wide needs
- Modeling to encourage high level thinking and good decisions related to community

A Framework for Professional Development and Change-Agentry

Action research, as a way of knowing, is a transformative process; it gives those involved in it the power to generate new knowledge, new meanings and new solutions to a range of problems. Leaders whose aim is systemic change can benefit from action research.

In addition, research shows that there are specific elements to successful change-agentry. Those who facilitate and lead change will need to understand that

- Change is a process
- Change means loss
- Change threatens identity
- Change creates uncertainty, which causes vulnerability
- Change requires a shared vision
- Change requires clear communication
- Change requires explanation of roles and responsibilities
- Change can be driven by urgency

Therefore, a useful framework for professional development of school leaders will be structured on principles of action research, include a theoretical understanding of change, and provide a structure and support for networking and publishing new approaches that address the challenges of leadership that promotes transformative educational practices.

The Plan

In keeping with Greenwood and Lewin's definition of action research and the principles of change agentry, the Rural School Leaders Working Group proposes the following plan for school leadership development in the Delta and Deep South. It is important to note that the proposed plan (1) spans a minimum of three years; (2) requires intensive and sustained support over that period of time; and (3) relies upon broad stakeholder participation.

It is expected that, once formed, local inquiry teams will meet at least weekly. To encourage that, efforts will be made to identify higher education partners that will award graduate degree credits and provide project coaches from among their educational leadership program faculty members.

Rural School Leaders Professional Development Plan - Year 1

What	Who	How	When
Invite RSLWG members to participate in practitioner-led professional development for school improvement	Rural Trust Staff	Letters of invitation	July 2003
Identify 4 potential sites	Rural Trust Staff	Follow-up phone calls	July 2003
Identify a higher education or practitioner-expert mentor for each site	Rural Trust Staff School Leader	Invitation from existing network	August 2003
Contract a school leadership consultant	Rural Trust	Select from existing network	August 2003
Form action research team or teams of 8-10 people, including school leaders, teachers, parents, community members and youth, around each of the areas the site wishes to address (suggest no more than 2 to start)	Local School or School District		August 2003
Meet with contact persons and local groups in selected sites to introduce concept to selected audiences (Board, parents, community groups, etc.), identify resources for professional development, and address local questions	Rural Trust Staff	On-site visits	August 2003
Plan action research project in one or more of the four identified areas	Rural Trust Staff Local Group Expert-Mentor	On-site work sessions with local team	August- September 2003
Provide initial training of local groups in establishing and maintaining learning communities, action research, change agency, and problem clarification	Rural Trust Staff Local Groups Expert-Mentors Consultant/Trainer	Convening of teams across selected sites	September 2003
Provide on-going support to local teams	Rural Trust Staff Expert-Mentors	On-site visits On-line discussions Telephone follow up	Monthly
Provide additional training based on need	Rural Trust Staff Expert-Mentors Consultants	Convening of teams across selected sites	November 2003
Provide opportunities for participating sites to share their learning among themselves and to learn from high performing schools and districts	Rural Trust Staff School Leaders Local Groups	Cross-site visits Team visits to out-of-network sites	January - February 2004
Provide additional training based on need	Rural Trust Staff Expert-Mentors Consultants	Convening of teams across selected sites	March 2004
Provide opportunity for additional sharing and training	Rural Trust Staff Expert-Mentors Consultants	Convening of teams across selected sites	Summer 2004
Publish learnings	Rural Trust Staff		Fall 2004


In addition, the Rural Trust staff will assist school leaders in identifying sources of professional development funding within existing Title I and other budgets, as well as potential outside sources.

The first-hand experience that leaders and their inquiry teams gain from this approach will be useful in understanding how to incorporate action research as a problem-solving strategy in other aspects of their work. School leaders will need time to learn, model, and mentor practitioners in the use of action research, and to convene to discuss action

research projects to be implemented with teams in their districts. These leaders would meet periodically to give updates, learn from each other's work and publish articles and materials for distribution.

Out of this initial group should emerge a network of school leaders who can facilitate and mentor others in action research for whole-school improvement and systemic change. This network might also continue to explore the challenges and opportunities for leading educational systems that promote high educational achievement.

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