

**An Inquiry into Distributed Leadership in Virginia:
*From Reliance on Self to Reliance on Collective Strength***

**Sponsored by the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute (CEPI)
William C. Boshier, Executive Director, CEPI, and Dean, School of Education
Virginia Commonwealth University
Oliver Hall, 1015 West Main Street
P.O. Box 842020
Richmond, VA 23284-2020
Phone: (804) 827-3290
www.cepionline.org**

And the Virginia State Action for Education Leadership Project (VA-SAELP)

**Funded by The Wallace Foundation
www.wallacefunds.org**

**And Supported by a National Consortium
Consisting of
Education Commission of the States,
Council of Chief State School Officers,
National Council of State Legislatures,
National Governors Association, and
National Association of State Boards of Education**

David Mutter, Ed.D.

School Solutions

dmtter@cox.net

757-547-0215

September 2003

Davida W. Mutter is a recently retired Assistant Superintendent for Budget and Finance for Chesapeake Public Schools in Chesapeake, Virginia, having also served in the division as Director of Budget, Director of Staff Development, and Director of Program Evaluation. Davida is currently a consultant for program evaluation at the school and district levels and is involved in training prospective principals in handling school funds. Her recent national conference presentations on each of these topics include the National School Board Conference in San Francisco (1999) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals in Anaheim (2003).

Over the years she has written on a number of educational topics for such journals as *American School Board Journal*, *Journal for Educational Facility Planners*, *School Business Affairs*, and *ERS Spectrum*. Davida is also a co-author of two books in press at the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) in Alexandria, Virginia:

- *School Money Matters: A Handbook for Principals*, with Pam Parker, available in January 2004 and
- “Program Evaluation: Getting Started and Doing it Right,” with Elaine Chase, forthcoming.

Davida Mutter, Ed.D.

School Solutions

dmtter@cox.net

757-547-0215

[\[1\]](#)

An Inquiry into Distributed Leadership in Virginia : *From Reliance on Self to Reliance on Collective Strength*

Executive Summary

Introduction

School divisions in Virginia, as well as in the nation at large, are facing challenges never envisioned a decade ago. The standards-based movement of the mid-1990's shifted the focus of schools from comparing students with one another to measuring student achievement against standards set for all at both the state and the federal levels. Meanwhile, the complexities of schooling increased dramatically with growth or loss of student population and shifts in the ethnic, cultural, and economic makeup of many neighborhoods. In attempting to cope with rapid change, many school leaders began to question the time-honored top/down organizational context for managing schools.

Concurrently, just as adjustments to these trends were being planned, an entirely new dimension entered the mix with the entrance into the 21st Century. For the first time, school divisions began to contemplate seriously the en masse loss of their leadership base within a very few years. The sheer passage of time had created the reality of the impending retirement of large numbers of career teachers and administrators at a time when teamwork and experience were never more important.

For forward-thinking school divisions, it was apparent that cosmetic changes, in the face of the combination of these challenges, would not suffice. Long-term plans with creative solutions for

raising student achievement, along with the need to retain, retrain, and replace school leaders, have become of the utmost importance.

Distributed Leadership in the Demonstration Sites

Five school divisions in Virginia began to address this task with a close examination of the decision-making culture of schooling and a search for professional development experiences in leadership from both corporate and educational environments that could provide some assistance in meeting the current challenges. These school divisions are Fairfax, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, and Roanoke City.

This paper, along with the interview documents which follow, attempts to chronicle to date the dynamic professional development projects of these five school divisions which were recently born of necessity in order to 1) raise student achievement on a large scale among all student groups, 2) maintain a succession plan for developing current and future school leaders as many principals and teachers leave the profession due to retirement, and 3) improve the cultural environment for facilitating team leadership at the school level.

CEPI staff, in conjunction with this researcher, prepared the interview protocol used to gather information and perceptions for this investigation, based on acquaintance with the projects. The 10 questions of the interview protocol were divided into major topics covering all aspects of the project, as follows: Context, Overview, Focus of the Survey, Origins of Your Effort, Specific Goals, Planning Phase, Important Resources, Specific Roles, Your Purpose for Developing Leadership Teams, and Changes Based on Formative Evaluations (see Appendix A). Each structured interview took place between September 4 and 11, 2003; the interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes in private phone conversations between the researcher and the respondents.

The purpose of this study was to discover the manner in which each division attempted to address collaborative concepts of leadership. The survey was originally listed as an activity under Policy Initiative #5, Distributed Leadership Models (corresponding to SAELP Strategy #5. Conditions of Practice) in the Implementation Phase plan submitted by CEPI to the Wallace/Reader's Digest Funds in November 2001. The practice of distributed leadership was seen as a means of providing on-the-job assistance to overworked administrators while at the same time improving participation, both in decision making and in leadership functions, by school personnel at all levels. The results of this inquiry will be broadly disseminated by CEPI throughout the state and forwarded to appropriate agencies for any necessary changes at the policy and regulations levels.

The Vision and Its Origins

For these five school divisions, a new vision for professional leadership training had practical origins beginning in 2000 with their pursuit of funding for Project LEAD through Wallace/Reader's Digest Funds (now The Wallace Foundation). The Funds offered Project LEAD grants to selected school districts within the SAELP states. Project LEAD focused primarily on programs and practices—the local perspective—while SAELP focused primarily on laws, policies, and regulations—the state perspective.

Within the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Funds originally identified 10 school divisions eligible for Project LEAD. These districts met certain criteria such as their proportion of minority and/or low-income students, but only five of the eligible 10 chose to pursue the grant. For purposes of VA-SAELP (the state project) the Funds designated these five as “demonstration sites.” In a variety of ways, the “demo sites” have been continuously involved in the state project, providing valuable information and making recommendations, thus strengthening connections between policy and practice.

Of the five divisions submitting proposals, only Fairfax County Public Schools received the Project LEAD grant funding. But, in the other four divisions, despite the lack of immediate outside funding, the vision had become too important to abandon. In all five divisions, a supportive superintendent and school board became the keys to moving forward after careful planning of a year or more. Later Newport News later received a small Ventures grant from the Wallace Funds, and Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, and Roanoke City allocated resources within their local budgets and found additional support within their communities.

Survey Findings: Commonalities and Particulars

The First Commonality: Vision of Leadership

In the course of reading and discussion within each division in order to articulate a concept on paper for the Project LEAD proposals and later efforts, a common vision emerged. Consequently, across all five “demo” sites, the survey revealed a vision of professional *learning communities with a supportive culture of leadership distributed among administrators and teachers who together are capable of handling the challenges faced by schools today*. Thus, the first commonality is this vision, which became the motivating ideal of these projects and remains in effect for leadership development efforts.

The Second Commonality: Reaching Accreditation and Eliminating Achievement Gaps

Although each leadership project has its own unique feature (e.g., mentored administrative interns in economically disadvantaged schools, the pairing of high and low achieving school teams, horizontally and vertically organized learning cohorts, mutually designed training with corporate professionals), all projects share the overriding “moral imperative” of eliminating achievement gaps among student groups and reaching full school accreditation with all deliberate

speed.

Additional Commonalities in Concept and Approach

The inquiry found other commonalities among all five demonstration sites, as follows:

- *Effective leadership emerging from within professional learning communities* is viewed as the most direct route to improved student achievement.
- Of equal importance are the goals of:
 - Enhancing the individual leadership skills of current principals,
 - Identifying and nurturing rising principals, and
 - Ultimately transferring these experiences to team decision making at the school level and with other school employee groups.
- Along the way, in each division, a contagious spirit of organizational renewal is a welcome by-product.

The Essence of Leadership Development

In the structured interviews, the project leader in each demonstration site described the most important elements of the current leadership program and then defined the essence of its concept (see answers to Question #2 in interview transcriptions). The dominant themes common to all five districts are these:

- Shared professional development with corporate and educational experts,
- Implementation of a continuous improvement succession plan for providing prepared leaders for the most challenging schools,
- Distributive leadership decision making in order to improve student achievement, and
- A general improvement of the conditions for educational leadership in order to attract and retain leadership talent.

Here, in the words of the project leaders, is a recap of the elements identified as most important in each school division:

- ***Fairfax Public Schools.*** We are addressing four elements of leadership: influencing people, leading learning, managing the business of schools, and personal as well as collective development.
 - *The essence of our program is a leadership process aimed at developing and supporting leaders in order to impact student achievement.*
- ***Hampton Public Schools.*** We are attempting to redesign our schools with the help of educational and corporate leaders. We are reviewing and redesigning the roles and functions of positions in an attempt to build professional learning communities with the principal as building facilitator.
 - *The essence of our program is to envision every school as a prism through*

which all ideas are passed and then translated into instruction. A major goal is for principals to develop the leadership skills to orchestrate this process effectively at the building level.

- ***Newport News Public Schools.*** We are pairing “needs improvement” schools with fully accredited schools in a collegial relationship of sister schools in full partnership. We are attempting to ensure that all “units” (e.g., classrooms, grade levels, positions) within these schools are part of a fully participating professional learning community as a vehicle for coping with positive change. Our program includes formal professional development with national experts to ensure that re-culturing schools is possible.
 - *The essence of our project is a voluntary, paired-school model with extensive, shared professional development based on the best of leadership research with the intent of creating conditions that allow leaders to cope with the complexity of schooling within a distributed leadership framework.*

- ***Norfolk Public Schools.*** The unique feature of our program is that the training resources of the Greater Norfolk Corporation are at our disposal. In an effort to address the schools as a quality-of-life issue, companies have offered their leadership development services to Norfolk principals. The offered training is planned jointly between the school division and the Greater Norfolk Corporation based on assessments of individual leadership patterns obtained from the principals’ experiences at the Center for Creative Leadership.
 - *The essence of the Leadership Academy in Norfolk is based on the premise that the entire community benefits from professionally developing leaders in the schools particularly when the training is customized and data driven to fill current skill gaps.*

- ***Roanoke City Public Schools.*** We have instituted an ongoing Leadership Academy, which has brought our veteran leaders and aspiring leaders together for training. Special benefits in team building and sharing of perspectives have emerged from the combining of these groups in professional development experiences with national and local experts. Our program is strictly invitational with activities designed based on the areas that veteran and aspiring leaders choose to develop.
 - *The essence of our program is ongoing leadership training that continues to sharpen and hone the skills of practicing leaders while engaging aspiring leaders in the process.*

Expectations for Leadership Development

Each division expressed its own specific expectations for its leadership development projects; however, common themes once again emerged among all five demonstration sites. Through customized professional development, each project expects in some degree to:

- Establish a career development system to attract, retain, and replace leaders among teachers, assistant principals, and principals;
- Eliminate the achievement gap among all student groups;
- Establish the link between leadership development and student achievement;
- Tap skills for working in teams in a proactive way;
- Develop continuous learning communities, eventually including all staff, and
- Reach full accreditation of all schools.

Not a Short-term Effort

Each division further expects that the process of moving from expectations to reality will be long-term and expensive in terms of resources and time. Each project director expects to adjust the division model and specific training as participants refine their personal and collective professional goals. For these five school divisions, the journey has just begun, because the process of developing and retooling leaders for today's schools is embraced as an ongoing construction project with as yet no preconceived blueprint.

Team-building: A Dominant Theme

In all five demonstration sites, the researcher's interviews with project leaders revealed a major shift from *reliance on self* to *reliance on the collective strength* of the group to meet the challenges of today's schools. As expressed by one project director, by bringing the insight of the group to bear on school problems, world-class leaders will produce world-class schools. Each respondent described team reliance in a professional community of educators in his or her own way, selecting the term most applicable to that division's leadership development efforts from among *team leadership*, *collaborative leadership*, or *distributed leadership*, (see Question 3 in Appendix A), as follows:

- ***Fairfax Public Schools: Empowerment***—Working to assist each school to develop its capacity to become a professional learning community with development embedded in the process as a result of external training and support;
- ***Hampton Public Schools: Distributive leadership***—Belief that leadership is a product of performance and that leaders emerge at every level. In this leadership framework, everyone comes to the table with the same potential for decision-making;
- ***Newport News Public Schools: Distributive leadership***—A leadership approach that seeks to enhance the skills and knowledge of the staff by collaboratively creating a coherent school culture;
- ***Norfolk Public Schools: Collaboration***—Working often with one another in order to work through the challenges in the division and relying on the idea that all of us are smarter

than one of us, and

- ***Roanoke City Public Schools: Team leadership***—A vehicle for developing a collaborative effort at all levels that focuses on the common goal of student achievement.

For these Virginia school divisions, the “collective whole,” working from a common conceptual framework in a supportive school climate, is viewed as the means for raising student achievement among all student groups in the most challenging schools.

Impressions of Outcomes from Distributed Leadership Practices

Although each of these leadership projects is in its early stages, some outcomes have been immediate and positive and are described below. Suffice it to say that it is difficult to capture on paper the spirit of adventure and enthusiasm expressed by each of the directors of the projects in the Virginia school divisions of Fairfax, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, and Roanoke City as they prepare for the “brave new world” of schooling apparent in the new century.

Increasing Collaborative Spirit

A benefit mentioned in all five divisions was the increasing collaborative spirit among principal and assistant principal groups and within vertical teams of participating schools. In some fashion, each project director verbalized the feeling among professional development participants of “being part of something bigger than yourself.” As a consequence, helping relationships have sprung up across these divisions that belie a former sense of isolation and even the good-natured competitive spirit between schools, teachers, and principals. This sense of being a team has apparently also resulted in enthusiasm within the profession as a whole as well as a greater sense of personal control.

Solving the Retirement Dilemma

A second positive outcome pertains to solving the looming retirement dilemma in these divisions. Apparently, the leadership training in these demonstration sites allows for administrative talent to become apparent quickly, so that promotions are already taking place within the assistant principal and administrative intern ranks. Equally important, some eligible principals are delaying retirement plans because the distributed leadership environment intrigues them enough to remain on the job longer.

Redefining the Role of Central Administrators

Interestingly, in some of these divisions there has been a shift in the role of the central office administrator. No longer is there the expectation that these professionals will direct the schools. Rather, these staff members are redefining their roles as “servant leaders,” whose job it is to be supportive resources to those in schools as they work toward formalizing collaborative decision-making. Additionally, central office administrators in these divisions serve as talent scouts

charged with identifying those educators who should participate in the division's formal leadership training.

Showing Encouraging Gains in Student Achievement

Most important of all, encouraging gains in student achievement have begun to emerge in these divisions. Although each project director recognizes that the job of closing the student achievement gap has only just begun, with the collective effort of the school division behind this goal, staff is facing the challenge with renewed confidence in the leadership capacity of the school division for getting the job done.

Monitoring Results

The demonstration sites will continue to monitor these early impressions, to see whether the positive changes are sustained as their leadership development efforts continue and to adapt their training, as circumstances require. The goal of strengthening the leadership development process as well as attracting and retaining prepared leaders will continue to guide the refinement process.

Detailed Findings: Interview Transcriptions

For detailed information on the responses from each project director, please see the following transcriptions of each structured interview.

Fairfax	Page 10
Hampton	Page 15
Newport News	Page 20
Norfolk	Page 26
Roanoke City	Page 31

For reference also, please note the interview protocol in Appendix A (see page 36), which presents only the questions asked of the respondents.

[1]

This paper only summarizes the perspective of division administrators who were interviewed.