



The Association of California School Administrators

First to Worst to First

A Report from ACSA's
Learning and Teaching Task Force

Jeanie Cash, Chair

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From First to Worst to First
Leadership towards Reestablishing California as
“The Envy of Schools Worldwide”

Introduction

The Mission of ACSA is to

- Support California’s educational leaders;
- **Ensure all students have the essential skills and knowledge needed to excel;** and
- Champion public education

ACSA’s Vivid Description includes the following:

Advancement of the interests, needs and well-being of California students will be the hallmark of ACSA action. ACSA will advocate for California schools to be once again the best in the nation, and the envy of schools worldwide.

With that mission and that description in mind ACSA’s 2007-2008 President, Bob Lee, created the Learning and Teaching Task Force. The Task Force first met in December of 2007 and was presented with the following challenges by Bob Wells, ACSA’s Executive Director:

- ACSA needs to not shy away from assuming leadership in certain areas of learning and teaching.
- We have a choice to wring our hands or take steps to figure out what change we want to see in areas such as our current accountability system.
- We can make a list of what’s wrong, but we need a road map on how to lead the change we want to see and set our priorities.
- Every leader has a role to play, not just the Curriculum and Instructional Leaders.
- Our goal should be to be proactive as opposed to taking a reactive stance.
- We are held accountable for raising the quality of education in California and in order to do that, we have to raise the level of funding.

- We are near last out of 50 states in almost every category such as class size, administrative ratios, counseling services, etc. Our standards are the highest in the nation and we are 60% leaner than average in student/administrator ratios.
- Your charge as the Learning and Teaching Task Force is to create a roadmap to ensure that learning and teaching in California is at the highest levels.

It is the hope of all Task Force Members that the goals and objectives that have been created serve as a foundation for ACSA's efforts for California's public schools to once again be "the envy of schools worldwide."

Learning and Teaching Task Force Members

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Background

In the 2004 Public Broadcasting Service documentary, *From First to Worst*, John Merrow reported that “by 1994 California ranked at the bottom in national assessments, and that “on the most recent national assessment, California ranked 9th from the bottom. In per-pupil spending, the country's richest state ranks 37th.” This is a sharp contrast to the 1950’s of which Merrow observed, “California schools were thought to be among the best in the nation” and that “public schools were being built by the hour, and dedicated. And public school architecture was at its best. An entire generation of talented young men and women went into public school teaching and administration. There was as sense that a utopia was being formed in the classroom.” (Merrow, 2004)

This contrast serves to frame the need for ACSA’s involvement in policies and practice related to learning and teaching. However, the stakes are high not just for California but also for the nation; one in every eight students in America attends a California public school. If ACSA is to indeed be “the most influential, respected, student-focused, and service-oriented educational association in existence” then its leadership on issues of learning and teaching must be at the forefront of the actions ACSA takes as an organization.

Although it is tempting to blame California’s decline in education on issues of funding alone, the need also exists to ensure that efforts to improve California schools are grounded in best practices that have been carefully selected for the student population being served. This can best occur when policy makers set a steady course and when there is a shared understanding of what students must know and be able to do. California’s Content Standards provide such a common understanding of what students must know. This task force has focused on the leadership practices that will create the best opportunity for students to learn based on instructional practices that focus on the growth of each individual student in every classroom and in every school.

ACSA’s 2003 report, *Leadership Coaching: Developing and Supporting Educational Leaders*, pointed out the issues facing current educational leaders noting:

Today, in a time of high stakes testing and accountability, political dissonance, fiscal uncertainty, ever-changing policy directives, unparalleled student diversity, and waning public perception, effective educational leadership has never been at such a premium. Today’s educational leader is expected to be an educational visionary, assessment expert, instructional strategies expert, disciplinarian, community builder, crisis manager, communications expert, budget guru, facility manager, special programs administrator, and legal expert.

These challenges can best be met when there is clarity at both the state and local level about the most fundamental issues of learning and teaching. To this end ACSA's Learning and Teaching Task Force establishes the following goals:

Goal 1: Clarify and redefine the roles and responsibilities of site and district administrators. Identify ways to provide additional help with operational responsibilities to allow site administrators to serve as instructional leaders

Various resources have been developed for the purpose of defining the most essential and appropriate roles of educational leaders. Most notable for California are the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSELs), which were created through a collaborative effort, led by ACSA, of leaders from higher education, the California Department of Education, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, site and district leaders, and the California School Leadership Academy at WestEd in an effort to update the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for California so that they reflected a shift towards standards-based practice and the diversity of students in our schools. Others have attempted to describe the leadership practices most closely connected to student learning. (Cotton, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005)

Michael Bossi suggests that there are six overriding themes in all of these attempts to define educational leadership, namely: Visionary/Cultural, Operational, Instructional, Learning, Collaborative, and Strategic. Although types of leadership are constantly interacting Bossi points out that "instructional leadership must ensure that the school's educators teach children, not just curriculum," and that "leadership's charge is not to ensure that all students are taught, it is to ensure that all students learn." (Bossi, 2008)

This instructional and learning leadership is the focus of the report. It is not expected that the roles and responsibilities will remain static as times change, however, if today's leaders are to have the time to make learning and teaching their first priority then they must be supported in the other themes of leadership. To that end the Task Force recommends the following:

Develop a clear position paper that sets forth recommendations regarding site and district leadership roles and supporting practices necessary to meet the increasing demands of California's instructional leaders.

The need to increase California's administrator to student ratios is obvious. Currently there are many time-consuming, yet necessary, operational day-to-day

tasks that are done in many schools by a single certificated principal. New monies should be set aside at a state level so that districts, at their discretion, can support the leadership of instruction by creating school managers to coordinate many of the everyday issues that must now be dealt with by the school principal. This can free the time of the trained instructional leader to influence, supervise and evaluate instructional practices.

The amount of time principals must spend on “short term” issues is unlikely to change as long as the number of California school and district leaders remains insufficient to accomplish the many tasks their work demands. Again, California ranks at the bottom of the state-to state comparisons in terms of the ratio of administrators to students. If California’s school and district leaders are to reach their full potential in maximizing their role in increasing student achievement and closing the achievement gap, then there must be sufficient numbers of them and support for them to accomplish this task.

Consider alternate site governance structures, staffing ratios, and innovative leadership models to address the challenges of instructional leadership and operational management.

Many studies provide clear evidence regarding the importance of specific skills, abilities, and behaviors that leaders must exhibit in order to be effective. Thus, a critical element for policy development must be to ensure that school leaders have the opportunities to expand their repertoire of skills and time to practice what they learn.

A position paper outlining these responsibilities that also demonstrates the advantages to students of skilled leadership would be an important tool while advocating for state and local policies that will improve the leadership of learning and teaching in California’s schools.

Goal 2: Establish an ACSA Information Hub that reviews and reports a summary of the current research, the trends and projections of needs related to California’s administrators.

According to a survey of ACSA’s membership in 2007, ACSA is not currently perceived as a leader of research or best practices in the arena of learning and teaching. Communication to ACSA members is provided through *EdCal* and *Leadership*, through council and committee representatives and through regional meetings. The ACSA website, the Friday Letter and email correspondence is available to most members, however, all of these methods of communication are not fully developed nor are they used to their maximum capacity.

There is a need for ACSA to become current with generational methods of accessing information. There is a lack of focused marketing and professional development opportunities are costly and geographically specific.

With the high stakes accountability facing California leaders today, it is imperative that leaders have the information, resources and support they need to be credible as instructional leaders. There is an abundance of research regarding best practices in the area of learning and teaching available from a variety of sources. Just as high performing schools cannot be maintained without extensive support from the district and the State, high performing leaders need the support of their professional organization. The challenge for leaders today is the inability to filter, categorize and prioritize the research and identify successful models in the area of learning and teaching.

Effective educational leaders must support new, proven initiatives and develop and manage necessary resources to support and maintain such initiatives. These responsibilities can include setting educational standards, goals, policies, developing academic programs, and staff supervision. The ability to lead, inspire and change classroom practice can be capitalized upon by exposing oneself to the best practices and successful current trends in education. This is especially important given the great diversity of the students in California and the need for classroom practices to be responsive to cultural differences. We believe that it is a difficult challenge for educational leaders to expose themselves to these best practices and current trends and that ACSA can provide this service to its members.

The Task Force recommends the following:

Develop web-based resources so that ACSA is the first place educational leaders go for current, relevant information on learning and teaching. ACSA should be the homepage for educational leaders in California and provide information, resources and support to assist leaders in their daily jobs and in establishing their goals.

There is strong evidence, supported by both research and experience, that successful and continuous improvement efforts in learning and teaching are best sustained if they are systemic within a district. This systemic change needs to be supported by research. Professional development and advocacy efforts could better be targeted, more credible, and more flexible if data was readily available. Compared to other state agencies that are equipped with data to advocate for their causes, ACSA often has little access to data that is vital for its advocacy and professional development efforts.

Collect, interpret, and disseminate information to inform educational leaders and make recommendations regarding learning and teaching. The ACSA Information Hub will establish partnerships with institutes of higher education and other organizations to assist in research and the collection of information and data.

Goal 3: Provide support for educational leaders through a network of coaches and mentors to support instructional leadership development and their ability to address specific challenges.

“The success of California schools is largely determined by the quality of the leaders serving in those schools. ACSA continues to play a significant role in staying current and steering the course for improvements and progress for public education, for school leaders and for our profession.” (ACSA’s Leadership Coaching: Five-Year Plan)

In 2005, ACSA’s Board of Directors formed a Task Force on Leadership Coaching. This task force developed a strategic plan that aligns ACSA’s mission and core values and expands ACSA’s current efforts to position ACSA as the primary provider of coaching development and leadership support. The need for educational leaders in California’s public schools is greater than ever as *Baby Boomers* near retirement. Many new principals are hired with less teaching and administrative experience and many are called to district leadership positions with very little site experience. As the roles and expectations of leaders of learning and teaching continue to evolve, ACSA must provide a network of mentors and coaches to support educational leaders. The Learning and Teaching Task Force recommends:

Implement ACSA’s Five-Year Plan for Leadership Coaching that provides a clear roadmap for a structure for providing professional coaches for all educational leaders.

Every school leader in California deserves similar high quality professional development and support. New leaders should have access to a professional leadership coach as part of their induction process during their first years of service. Such processes should include both intensive, site-based, individualized coaching, and a curriculum designed around the needs of the new professional leader. To ensure continued professional growth and career-long learning, experienced administrators — including principals, superintendents, central office administrators, classified educational leaders (CEL) and other school leaders — also should have access to certified coaches throughout their careers.

In addition to professional coaching the Task Force recommends:

Establish networks of informal mentoring, in all ACSA Regions, so that expertise can be shared across district boundaries. Every ACSA member could benefit from a professional partner on call to discuss the challenges that arise both on a day-to-day basis and when implementing reform.

Goal 4: Impact learning and teaching by:

- a. Increasing the capacity for administrators to be instructional leaders and advocate for administrative ratios and support systems that allow for an administrator’s on-going success as an instructional leader.
- b. Creating purposeful learning communities where leaders can share best practices and important research.

Today’s administrators are expected to be instructional leaders and operational managers, which includes innumerable responsibilities that overwhelm and stress novice administrators. Expectations are not realistic and impede an administrator’s ability to be an effective instructional leader.

Brian McNulty, states that “by looking at our challenges and successes we will have a clearer understanding of ‘what’s the right work’ and have a different way of thinking about how we hold ourselves collectively responsible to move the work forward.” (Marzano et al., 2005)

ACSA’s vision is to support California’s educational leaders and help them identify “what’s the right work.” Based on this vision and the feedback from the recent California adequacy studies, *Getting Down to Facts*, the Task Force recommends that ACSA:

Develop a clear position on “what’s the right work” in learning and teaching. Continually make recommendations regarding site and district leadership roles and supporting practices necessary to meet the increasing demands of California’s instructional leaders.

In order to accomplish this goal, the Task Force recommends that ACSA:

Become a broker of current research and identify skills and dispositions of effective educational leaders and their practices and continue to deepen and strengthen the leadership strands at ACSA’s Leadership Summit, professional learning offerings and academies.

And, as a way to share the research and best practices:

Develop purposeful learning communities in which members learn from each other person-to-person and through the ACSA website, blogs, podcasts, and high quality printed materials which focus on best practices for restructuring, school reform, accountability, instruction, effective supervision and support of instruction.

In addition, the Task Force recommends that ACSA's governmental relations team continue to:

Advocate for lower administrator to teacher ratios and to research and make recommendations for improvement and quality control with the existing administrative training programs.

Goal 5: Remain vigilant in creating and supporting State policies that will improve student learning and instruction, Pre-K through Adult.

Members have come to expect ACSA to advocate for legislation and state policy with clarity, skill, and success. Our Legislative Advocates are among the most highly regarded and respected in the State. Members have learned that what happens in Sacramento has a long lasting effect on what can and will happen in their classrooms.

Both the federal and state accountability systems are based on specific growth targets based on the Academic Performance Index (API) or the percentage of students who have scored as proficient or advanced on the California Standards Test (AYP). Neither API nor AYP targets take into consideration the amount of growth an individual student has made over a school year. The members of the Task Force believe that the amount of growth individual students make from year to year provides a much better basis for accountability. To that end the Task Force recommends the following:

Evolve the state accountability system so that all targets are based on the growth of individual students,

In order for that to happen schools and district must be continually aware of student progress and levels of mastery wherever that student has previously attended schools. Our current data system does not monitor students as they move from district to district.

Create and maintain a statewide data system that allows access and use of individual student information wherever that child may be enrolled,

Currently 1,490 content standards are included in the California Standards Test, grades 2-12. On average that is over 135 standards/grade. The best thinking in assessment recommends that a minimum of 5 questions be asked per standard in order to determine mastery. This would mean that to meet quality standards for assessment each grade level standards test would require a minimum of 675 questions. Allowing students a mere 90 seconds per question would require 17 hours of testing, on average, let alone administration time. Because of these time restrictions current state testing is based on a sampling of standards. This may be fine if what is desired is statewide results, but teachers and schools require information about individual student progress. If a state system of assessment is to provide accurate information about individual student growth then fewer standards must be tested. Therefore:

Identify key content standards for all subject areas and grades or courses, as appropriate, and develop a clear understanding for knowing precisely what students must know and be able to do to demonstrate mastery of those key standards.

As well as:

Ensure that student mastery of identified key standards is the basis of any statewide accountability system,

Student learning increases when instruction is modified based on prior knowledge and an understanding of what students have learned during a lesson. As important as once a year tests may be to policymakers the assessment that matters most is the feedback teachers receive about student learning during a lesson. Teachers need data that allows them to personalize instruction making it more precise.

How students respond to instruction must become the basis for the instruction students receive. Skilled teachers have mastered a variety of techniques for “checking for understanding,” and we are approaching a time when technological advances may provide great assistance with both speed and accuracy of such formative assessments. Advocacy for State legislation and regulations is required to ensure that such formative assessments are a first priority. Therefore, the Task Force recommends:

Recommend the use of formative assessments so that activities in the classroom are modified on a daily basis as determined by student response to instruction.

In conclusion, the Learning and Teaching Task Force members have responded to the challenges presented by ACSA's Executive Director, Bob Wells, as we support the belief that ACSA must be proactive in leading the charge in the area of learning and teaching. We believe these goals will guide ACSA in its mission to ensure all students have the essential skills and knowledge needed to excel.

References

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- Merrow, J. (2004). From first to worst. On *The Merrow Report*. New York: Public Broadcasting System.

LEARNING AND TEACHING TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Goal 1: Clarify and redefine the roles and responsibilities of site and district administrators. Identify ways to provide additional help with operational responsibilities to allow site administrators to serve as instructional leaders

Priority Actions:

- *Develop a clear position paper that sets forth recommendations regarding site and district leadership roles and supporting practices necessary to meet the increasing demands of California's instructional leaders.*
- *Consider alternate site governance structures, staffing ratios, and innovation leadership models to address the challenges of instructional leadership and operational management.*

Goal 2: Establish an ACSA Information Hub that reviews and reports a summary of the current research, the trends and projections of needs related to California's administrators.

Priority Actions

- *Develop web-based resources so that ACSA is the first place educational leaders go for current, relevant information on learning and teaching. ACSA should be the homepage for educational leaders in California and provide information, resources and support to assist leaders in their daily jobs and in establishing their goals.*
- *Collect, interpret, and disseminate information to inform educational leaders and make recommendations regarding learning and teaching. The ACSA Information Hub will establish partnerships with institutes of higher education and other organizations to assist in research and the collection of information and data.*

Goal 3: Provide support for educational leaders through a network of coaches and mentors to support instructional leadership development and their ability to address specific challenges.

Priority Actions

- *Implement ACSA's Five-Year Plan for Leadership Coaching that provides a clear roadmap for a structure for providing professional coaches for all educational leaders.*
- *Establish a network of informal mentoring, in all ACSA Regions, so that expertise can be shared across district boundaries. Every ACSA member could benefit from a professional partner on call to discuss the challenges that arise both on a day-to-day basis and when implementing reform.*

Goal 4: Impact learning and teaching by increasing the capacity for administrators to be instructional leaders through advocating for lowering administrative ratios as well as creating support systems that allow for an administrator's on-going success as an instructional leader.

Priority Actions

- *Develop a clear position on the "what's the right work" in learning and teaching. Continually make recommendations regarding site and district leadership roles and supporting practices necessary to meet the increasing demands of California's instructional leaders.*
- *Become a broker of current research and identify skills and dispositions of effective educational leaders and their practices and continue to deepen and strengthen the leadership strands at ACSA's Leadership Summit, professional learning offerings and academies.*
- *Develop purposeful learning communities in which members learn from each other person-to-person and through the ACSA website, blogs, podcasts, and high quality printed materials which focus on best practices for restructuring, school reform, accountability, instruction, effective supervision and support of instruction.*
- *Advocate for lower administrator to teacher ratios and research and make recommendations for improvement and quality control with state supported administrative training programs.*

Goal 5: Remain vigilant in creating and supporting State policies that will improve student learning and instruction, Pre-K through Adult.

Priority Actions

- *Evolve the state accountability system so that all targets are based on the growth of individual students,*
- *Create a statewide data system that allows access and use of individual student information wherever that child may be enrolled,*
- *Identify key content standards for all subject areas and grades or courses, as appropriate, and develop clear understanding for knowing precisely what students must know and be able to do to demonstrate mastery of those key standards,*
- *Ensure that student mastery of identified key standards is the basis of any state sponsored accountability system,*
- *Recommend the use of formative assessments so that activities in the classroom are modified on a daily basis as determined by student response to instruction.*

Approved by the ACSA Board of Directors, May 16, 2008