

Everyone on Board

Developing, communicating and embracing a clear, district-wide vision is key for student success and continuous improvement

SESSION *Lessons Learned: Leadership for Improved Student Learning* | **Presenters**
Wisconsin RtI Center: Heidi Laabs, coaching coordinator; Association of Wisconsin School Administrators: Joe Schroeder, associate executive director

Sometimes too much effort can be a waste of time when it comes to improving student achievement.

Heidi Laabs, coaching coordinator for the Wisconsin RtI Center, and Joe Schroeder, associate executive director of the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators, drew on their years of experience to offer tips for leading the way to improving student learning. And their first suggestion was to focus.

Desperate to see significant results, too many districts tend to embrace every new strategy that comes along instead of focusing on just a few, Schroeder said. This leads to “initiative overload” and staff fatigue and nothing effective gets done.

“We have never been in an era of so much initiative overload as we are right now,” Schroeder explained.

The key is to make the shift from an initiative to a strategy. “It’s got to be the shift of not ends, but means to an end,” he added.

During an interactive session where audience members talked in small groups about what was happening in their own districts, Laabs and Schroeder presented a series of ways districts could work to effectively make changes to improve student achievement.

Developing a clear vision of where a district wants to go is very important, Laabs said. The vision needs to be fully communicated and embraced systemically — from district to school to classroom. To ensure district-wide alignment, a diverse leadership team should be tasked with developing the vision, she added.

Schroeder suggested districts start by analyzing their existing data and identifying problems that need to be addressed. Then a plan of action can be developed and communicated to all stakeholders.

“All too often school improvement efforts are about the solution not the problem,” he said.

The process of continuous improvement is a cycle: collecting data, selecting strategies, setting goals, implementing strategies, assessing the strategies. Making effective change takes time. Laabs said it could take up to seven years to see a significant change.

Schroeder said each cycle should last about 100 days, three times a year. District leaders should be able to learn something from each cycle, he added.

One challenge is to make sure there are “non-negotiable” areas of focus throughout the district, espe-



“We have never been in an era of so much initiative overload as we are right now.”

cially in terms of content, scope and instructional techniques. In order to be effective, the change strategies have to be identical district wide. If individual schools or staff try the strategy, decide it’s not working and do something else on their own, that can sabotage the whole process.

“Schools don’t get to be independent operators,” Laabs said.

Another issue is making sure changes in strategy are learned completely so they can be replicated accurately by all classroom teachers. Presenting and modeling a theory is not enough to ensure that all staff have learned the skill. Job coaching — although expensive — is the most effective way to make sure the skill has been attained, Laabs added.

“This is hard work. This is the right work,” Schroeder said. “This is the work of improving a system.” ■