How to create a Superintendents’ Leadership Council that assures equity for culturally and linguistically diverse students in an era of educational reform

Why was the New England Superintendents’ Leadership Council designed and implemented?

Northeast school districts have a long history of serving English language learner (ELL) students from diverse backgrounds. Since the 19th century, local education agencies have enrolled large numbers of French speakers from Canada, as well as Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish students. Also, a significant number of Southeast Asian immigrant children were enrolled in the urban areas of the region during the 1970s and 1980s. The number of language minority students in New England’s school districts continues to grow rapidly. According to the 1990 census, Rhode Island had the largest growth in the percentage of Hispanics (133%) and Asians (246%) in the United States during the previous decade. New Hampshire’s minority population grew 219% in the 1980s and the state experienced the second-largest growth of the number of Asians in the United States. Since 1980, Massachusetts has seen a 103% growth in Hispanic populations in both urban and rural areas. Connecticut witnessed a demographic growth of 170% for Asians and 72% for Hispanics. The linguistically diverse population in Vermont grew at almost four times the rate of the rest of the state’s population.

Throughout the region, the number of language-minority students who are enrolling in school districts and who require language and educational services is increasing daily. ELL students are present in rural and suburban schools as well as in the large city districts.

Historically, most school district superintendents have tended to leave issues affecting ELL children to their districts’ bilingual education specialists. By 1989, however, it was clear that dealing effectively and equitably with the educational needs of the diverse and growing immigrant student population demanded the involvement of knowledgeable and committed school leaders. Strong, proactive efforts by superintendents, in particular, would be critical to assuring the policy emphasis, resources, and community support required for success. The formation of the New England Superintendents’ Leadership Council was a response to this demand.

The New England Superintendents’ Leadership Council (NESLC) was founded in 1989 at The Education Alliance, a department of Brown University. The NESLC is a consortium of school district executive officers who are dedicated to improving the education of ELLs and addressing equity issues confronting language and cultural
minority children and their families. The NESLC expanded its area of service to the public schools of New York (both New York City and throughout the state), Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands in 1995.

Who is involved in the design and implementation of a Superintendents’ Leadership Council?

Brown University, under the sponsorship of the New England Multifunctional Resource Center (NEMRC) and its director, Dr. Adeline Becker, convened the first New England Superintendents’ Leadership Institute on June 26-28, 1989. Twenty-six superintendents from each of the New England states, representing school districts that included limited English proficient–English language learner (LEP/ELL) students in their enrollment, were invited to participate in a discussion of “Ways for Establishing Effective Schools for At-Risk LEP/ELL Students.”

The Leadership Institute’s program was intensive. Superintendents formulated and discussed strategies to effect change in their local districts, with special focus on multiculturalism, reducing the dropout risk of linguistic minorities, frequent suspension of language minority students, problem-solving strategies, and partnerships with alternative programs. Discussions were led by national authorities, Brown staff, and state department of education officials.

At the wrap-up meeting, superintendents reported an increased awareness of the issues involved and expressed a desire to form a more permanent association to continue the dialogue begun at that Leadership Institute. They felt issues about educational programs and services for linguistic minority students were rarely emphasized in other regional or national superintendents’ organizations.

One superintendent from each of the six New England states agreed to participate in an advisory group that would provide follow-up on the concerns and suggestions expressed during the Leadership Institute. The first Advisory Board meeting included the six regional state education agency representatives. The New England Superintendents’ Leadership Council: A Consortium for Educating Language Minority Students (NESLC) was created and co-chairs were elected. Regional distribution and representation from districts with both high and low numbers of LEP/ELL students were important factors in electing co-chairs. Dr. Adeline Becker became the convener, with the NEMRC supporting the Leadership Council’s efforts.

The participants at the first Advisory Board meeting made the following decisions:

- The NESLC would convene annual Leadership Institutes.
- State education agency representatives would continue to participate in ex officio roles.
- NESLC membership would be open to any New England superintendent and expanded membership would be sought.
- An advisory board, composed of one superintendent (later changed to two) from each New England state and the director of The Education Alliance at Brown University, would meet at least twice a year (now quarterly) to plan future activities; each member representing a state would organize two state meetings per year to address language minority issues.

The NESLC recognizes that there can be a number of ways to organize a Superintendents’ Leadership Council (SLC). But from its own successful experience, the council believes that several elements are important:

- Superintendents coalesce around mutually agreed upon issues
- There is an external convenor or facilitator
- A superintendents’ advisory group sets the agenda
- Regularly scheduled meetings are “value-added” in support of the superintendents’ needs

At the wrap-up meeting, superintendents reported an increased awareness of the issues involved and expressed a desire to form a more permanent association to continue the dialogue.
What does the model look like?

The New England Superintendents’ Leadership Council is an organization of superintendents, driven by superintendents. Members come together to explore the many equity and excellence issues surrounding current education reforms affecting ELL students of all ages. All of the explorations are seen through the special lens of meeting the educational needs of diverse student groups, and consistent emphasis is placed on the imperative to design and deliver LEP/ELL services that are aligned with the mainstream educational programs in the school.

The SLC is governed by a rotating advisory board comprised of two superintendents from each state, the executive director of The Education Alliance, the director of the Superintendents’ Leadership Initiatives at The Education Alliance, and a representative from the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB). The LAB representative serves as the liaison to programs, activities, and research being conducted by the LAB. Representatives from the regional state departments of education also participate in an ex officio capacity.

The advisory board meets four times each year to review the vision and goals of the SLC and to plan activities for the Leadership Institute and state affiliate meetings.

The annual Leadership Institute is held every spring in Newport, Rhode Island, to explore current issues and practices.

State affiliate meetings complement the Leadership Institute and serve each state by focusing on topics specific to that state as identified by the state’s representatives to the advisory board and the state education agency representative.

Study or focus groups are convened intermittently for groups of 10 to 12 superintendents who meet four times annually to explore an issue in depth. The SLC provides a facilitator or expert to design action plans that translate studies into practice.

The SLC also publishes an annual Superintendents’ Journal to share ideas and focus on a topic of current interest, to document the keynote speeches at the annual institutes, as well as presentations at the state and regional activities convened by the Council.

Regional professional development events in strategic venues bring members together to learn about current programs and instructional practices.

What does a SLC provide for a superintendent?

A Superintendents’ Leadership Council provides:

- Leadership and advocacy at local, regional, and national levels on the education of LEP/ELL students
- Organization of a forum for the exchange of ideas about the role of the superintendent in meeting the needs of all children
- Professional development for superintendents on topics directly related to the goals of the SLC
- Dissemination of information about successful practices for meeting the learning needs of diverse student groups
- Mentoring between experienced SLC members and new members
- Recruitment of new superintendents for participation in council-sponsored activities
- Development of a network of professionals with informed knowledge and experience in the many facets of educating LEP/ELL students
- Development of strategic alliances to strengthen and support superintendents’ work

What kind of resources and support systems are needed to make a SLC work?

The resources and support systems necessary to make a SLC work include personnel, financial, and facilities. In the case of the NESLC, Brown University provides this
Superintendents have enhanced their skills for facilitating change in a time of great demographic and programmatic transformation. Superintendents have become better and more knowledgeable leaders of their schools and communities. By focusing on instruction for diverse and “at-risk” children, superintendents have helped to improve instruction for all children. Better and more precise instructional questions are asked and skill levels have increased. Education reform efforts in the past decade dictate that superintendents can no longer remain in the traditional role as CEOs of school districts, but that they must excel in their positions as visionary, financial, and political leaders as well as serve as the instructional leaders of their schools and communities.

Superintendent as leaders of community outreach efforts. Council members have led intensive activities at the local level to involve family and community members who have traditionally been detached from school activities due to language barriers or unfavorable experiences with their schools or other local institutions.

Superintendents as lead resources on LEP/ELL and equity issues. As superintendents become more active in council activities, they become the main resources for all issues related to LEP/ELL students and equity in diverse school settings. Many SLC members have assumed roles as technical assistance and information service providers regarding demographic data collection, effective instructional practices, program design, and assessment practices for diverse student populations.

Superintendents as advocates for “at-risk” children. Council members have learned to use pertinent and persuasive language to market initiatives that address difficult issues surrounding the education and welfare of all students.

What have been some of the achievements of the New England Superintendents’ Leadership Council?

The US Department of Education, the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation have praised the NESLC as an organization worthy of support and recognition. Superintendents who have participated in past and current activities of the NESLC have enthusiastically applauded the organization for its enhancement of important leadership skills. Informal interviews with council members, Institute evaluations, in-depth district case studies, and informal questionnaires have identified specific achievements of the NESLC.

Superintendents as change agents. Superintendents have enhanced their skills for facilitating change in a time of great demographic and programmatic transformation. Thanks to their involvement in SLC activities, they have developed greater practical knowledge on how to foster and support constructive systems change in diverse school settings. They have learned to improve their performance and leadership techniques and have applied research findings to prioritize programs and services for language minority children so that individual needs of all students are addressed in a systemic way.
of “at-risk” children. At local, regional, and national levels, traditional support and advocacy for such children have often been the exclusive domain of teachers and occasional community representatives who have a personal interest or who work with this diverse student population. In addition, SLC members have participated intensely in activities promoting increased professional development, community participation, appropriate instruction, and financial support for programs targeted to this student population.

**Superintendents as collaborators and team leaders.**

The Leadership Council provided superintendents with a unique forum for networking and collaborating on equity and high standards for all children, among the most critical educational issues of the present time. It drew together superintendents who supported educational opportunity, shared similar beliefs and the desire to build a strong network of leaders to address diversity and equity issues, leading school districts and communities to a higher level of opportunity and achievement. This was one of the most successful accomplishments of the SLC.

**Superintendents and “public relations professionals.”**

Council members voiced an increased need for communicating effectively with the public and engaging community members in a “buy-in” of school reform efforts. In the current climate of intense politicization of public education, it is imperative that superintendents find ways to involve parents, community, board members, legislators, and others in school improvement efforts. Council members have benefited from listening to experts speak on public engagement; they have had the opportunity to discuss, practice, and develop effective communication strategies to create new partnerships for school improvement. Leadership Institutes in the past three years and study groups in the past two years have focused on public engagement as an important training topic.

**Why would superintendents want to participate?**

Superintendents participating in a SLC have the opportunity to be proactive and set the council’s agenda around issues critical to their daily work and for which they need immediate support. Certainly a key benefit to participation is the sharing of ideas and best practices through regular meetings, workshops, and forums linking members with similar programmatic needs. The council is where members can go beyond theory and discuss reform issues in an experiential realm, working out new ideas and mentoring new members.

James Connelly, retired Bridgeport, Connecticut, superintendent, longtime Council member, and former co-chair has stated that his participation provided him with “… the first opportunity to sit with other superintendents and focus on children who were underserved.”

Raymond McNulty, Brattleboro, Vermont, superintendent and current co-chair of the NESLC says, “Networking and collaborating with colleagues from other districts and states is one of the greatest benefits of participation in the NESLC; collaboration with other superintendents increased my understanding of the process, challenges and critical issues facing language minority communities in the country and in Vermont. The NESLC brings together a cluster of people, superintendents, who share and generate ideas on current issues affecting LEP/ELL and other children. The superintendents take these ideas back to their districts and bring clusters of teachers together to examine those ideas and develop them further. The result is improved academic achievement of language minority students. Our involvement with NESLC has encouraged us to expand our vistas. As a result, we reached out to China and established Institutes and a program of visiting scholars.”

Superintendent McNulty expressed the view, shared by many of his co-participants, that among the great benefits of being part of the NESLC network include the opportunities to share valuable knowledge and information in a safe and collegial environment, to learn
and share perspectives regionally, and to be able to “think outside the box.”

**What are the advantages of starting a Superintendents’ Leadership Council?**

Superintendent participants attest that:

- They receive significant benefits, both personal and professional.
- They value the networking and sharing of ideas with counterparts across the region and nation.
- They identify the NESLC as a safe, collegial and open environment for discussion of critical educational issues.
- They believe the SLC affords a unique opportunity to interact with experts on the cutting edge of educational reform in an informal and intimate setting.
- The SLC identifies and prioritizes LEP/ELL program needs.
- The SLC develops the superintendents’ change-agent skills.
- The SLC helps to leverage resources from various federal and private organizations to support districts’ efforts to provide equity for LEP/ELLs and all students.

**What are the challenges?**

- Building an organization that does not duplicate other professional groups to which superintendents have access
- Creating a “value-added” organization that provides current, relevant, and needed information to help superintendents cope with the demands of high-stakes education reform
- Creating an organization that provides superintendents with leadership skills to assure equity for all students
- A ssisting superintendents in the individualizing of services to meet the growing diversity of needs
- A ssisting superintendents in working with legislatures so that policies and mandates do not adversely affect the academic and social standing of language minority populations
- A ssisting superintendents in developing deep knowledge and experience in working with children who are different—either culturally or linguistically
- Supporting the superintendency when there is a critical shortage of persons who want or are qualified for the position
- Developing both the distinction and understanding of the issues of educating culturally and linguistically diverse students in urban, suburban, and rural areas
- Providing more relevant and effective professional development activities for administrators at the state level related to culturally and linguistically diverse students
- Making professional development opportunities appealing to high school faculty so that they embrace the issues of equity and diversity as their priorities
- Reaching out to parents and adults in the community who do not yet have an understanding of the importance of programs for culturally and linguistically diverse students

**What impact has the NESLC had on policies and procedures that have contributed to improving programs for culturally and linguistically diverse learners?**

- Members of the NESLC Advisory Board have successfully advocated at the regional, state, and national levels for improvement and funding in programs for LEP/ELL students. For example, Vermont is allocating additional entitlement funding for LEP/ELL students; Worcester, Massachusetts, is implementing “pre-approved” LEP/ELL program models; and Connecticut institutes of higher education are providing certification course work for teachers in Connecticut schools.
The Leadership Institutes and state affiliate activities have substantially raised the level of awareness and knowledge base of all NESLC members and Institute participants regarding LEP/ELL educational issues. Members have broadened their focus to include reform issues, standards and high stakes assessment for all children.

The Leadership Institutes, focus and study groups, and state affiliate activities have provided superintendents with many valuable professional development opportunities that have led a number of superintendents to become expert mentors and coaches to other superintendents in the region and around the country.

Members developed a strategic plan to recruit superintendents for participation in council activities and to forge a network that developed alliances with national professional organizations such as AASA, ASCD, NABE, as well as state and regional organizations, which in turn provided the opportunity to share professional development activities and relevant information.

Participating superintendents have reported significant district improvements in the areas of organization and infrastructure, instructional and other services for LEP/ELL students, professional development, and community outreach as a result of their membership.

There have been fundamental revisions of district and state policies regarding language minority populations, such as reorganization of school districts' structures to emphasize and strengthen ESL and bilingual programs, recruitment and hiring of certified ESL staff, provision of supplemental funding from state budgets and through federal grants, improved assessment and placement procedures.

Enhanced services are available for LEP/ELL students, and increased professional development, training, and technical assistance opportunities are available for administrators and staff.

ESL and bilingual programs and services are integrated into the mainstream curriculum.

The Superintendents' Leadership Council is a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, serving New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The Council serves as a link to the combined resources of Brown University and the LAB at Brown, offering a wealth of information about successful practices available to download through the Alliance web site (www.alliance.brown.edu). For more information on the Council, call 401.274.9548, ext. 277.
This brief was prepared by the staff of the NESLC, in conjunction with material written by LAB consultant Tran Huong Mai.

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly, or in part, by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), Department of Education, under contract no. RJ96006401. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

©2000 Brown University. All Rights Reserved.