



LEARNING **FIRST** ALLIANCE

Strengthening public schools for every child

Leadership Council Meeting Report: May 12 – 13, 2011

Each year the Learning First Alliance convenes the executive directors, senior staff and elected leadership of member organizations to discuss some of the major issues impacting public education and how we can work collaboratively to improve it.

2011 Education Visionary Award – Secretary Richard W. Riley

“The core pillar of our public education system is that all students deserve an equal, meaningful opportunity in education.”



The 2011 annual meeting began with the presentation of the first Learning First Alliance Education Visionary Award to Secretary Richard W. Riley. Secretary Riley spoke on public education reform and how the Learning First Alliance’s mission aligned closely with many of the goals he fought to achieve during his time as both the governor of South Carolina and the U.S. Secretary of Education. He urged attendees to make it a priority that every child has access to, and is encouraged to take, challenging courses, and furthermore that these courses are aligned with rigorous, internationally-benchmarked standards. Secretary Riley also spoke about the diverse demographic of students that make up our nation’s schools and the importance of making sure that our teachers and educational leaders exhibit the knowledge and cultural competence necessary to make sure these children succeed. He suggested that by providing students with character-building programs and social, as well as academic supports, school leaders can create a desperately needed social contract between schools and communities to raise the achievement level of all children. Encouraging disadvantaged students, and their parents, to hold high expectations, will allow children to learn passionately in their “element,” as their true best selves. “We must ensure that children reach their highest potential because they are our leaders of tomorrow,” Riley stated.

The Learning First Alliance 2011 Update

Executive Director of the Learning First Alliance, Cheryl Williams, shared the organization’s strategic plan to focus goals for the organization in the year ahead. The plan included LFA’s vision, mission statement and beliefs, as well as its goals to:

1. Ensure increased public support for public education through an aggressive communications strategy
2. Strengthen LFA’s standing as an organization that promotes sound policy and practice through collaborative activities with other leadership groups
3. Support LFA Leaders’ professional growth through opportunities for candid conversation and intensive interaction with thought-leaders.



Learn more about LFA at www.learningfirst.org.

Leadership ideas? Please contact Cheryl Williams, at williamsc@learningfirst.org or Anne O'Brien, at obriena@learningfirst.org.

“How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better”

A conversation with Dr. Mona Mourshed, Partner, McKinsey & Company



Dr. Mona Mourshed shared McKinsey & Company’s report on global education reform, which examined 20 improved (or improving) school systems worldwide. These systems started their journeys at varying levels of student performance and with varying financial commitments to education, but all have demonstrated significant improvement over the past several years. One key lesson to take from their experiences, according to Dr. Mourshed, is the need for school systems to move away from a “cookie cutter” solution for education reform and recognize that each individual school or system requires a unique intervention, though the interventions that successful systems have used tend to align based on starting performance.

Moving a system – or a school – from “poor” to “fair” student performance requires a drastically different approach than moving one from “good” to “great” student performance. For example, the solution in a poorly performing school maybe born from ineffective teachers. By using a highly systematized approach that provides each teacher with scripted lessons to ensure each student is learning the same material in each classroom, and then providing frequent, random assessments throughout the year to ensure students are on track, schools are creating a “machine to beat mediocrity,” said Mourshed. A school moving from good to great, on the other hand, may have highly skilled educators who require additional autonomy in their work. In either instance, for real reform to take hold, schools need to focus not only on what needs to be done, but on how to do it. The report showed that, in as little as six years, a school system can make significant gains from wherever it started.

To learn more about this research, please visit

http://www.mckinsey.com/clientservice/Social_Sector/our_practices/Education/Knowledge_Highlights/How%20School%20Systems%20Get%20Better.aspx.

Teacher Evaluations & Effectiveness—What Research Tells Us

A Conversation with Dr. Laura Goe, Research Scientist, Performance Research Group, Educational Testing Service

According to Dr. Laura Goe, the ultimate goal of teacher evaluation should be to improve teaching and learning. While this may sound like a simple statement, quality, effective teachers are not always a top priority for our education systems. Many of the current evaluation methods and models we use today, along with much of the research on teacher effectiveness, is flawed and does not give a comprehensive view of the actual quality of teaching in the classroom. In order to transform public education, we need to push for new evaluative measures for educators that include new measures of teacher effectiveness, like evidence of growth in student learning and competency,



instructional quality and professional responsibility. Dr. Goe shared many cautions and opportunities, as well as teacher behaviors and practices that correlate with achievement, which will help us ensure that there is a great teacher in every classroom.

To download a copy of this presentation, please visit www.lauragoe.com.

International Achievement Comparisons—What Can We Learn?

A conversation with Andreas Schleicher, OECD



Andreas Schleicher, who directs the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), gave a report on international achievement comparisons. On PISA, achievement includes not only students' ability to reproduce what they learn in school, but what students can extrapolate from what they have learned and then apply to their studies in new and familiar contexts. Mr. Schleicher spoke on the impact students' socioeconomic background has on performance in a number of countries, and about how some have a more socially equitable distribution of learning opportunities than others. He pointed out commonalities between high performing systems – for example, they often prioritize the quality of teachers over the size of the class – and compared them to the U.S. in terms of teacher salary, instruction time and class size. The U.S. can perhaps learn a lesson from Poland, which, by undertaking whole system reform, has fundamentally transformed their entire education system without increasing spending, raising both high school graduation rates and the number of college-bound students each year. Successful education systems, from very different socioeconomic backgrounds, share a number of core values in addition to structural characteristics:

- A commitment to education
- A belief that competencies can be learned and therefore all children can achieve
- Universal education standards implemented with an eye towards personalization

The most successful school systems see diversity as an opportunity, rather than a barrier, and provide school leaders with the resources and additional capabilities to assist each school in meeting the unique needs of its students.

To learn more about PISA results, please visit <http://www.oecd.org/edu/pisa/2009>.

Unlikely Alliances—Building Bridges to Excellence for All Students

A conversation with Dr. Vicki Phillips, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Dr. Vicki Phillips, of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, brought an interesting perspective to the agenda, speaking on the foundation's focus on three different areas in their education reform work – learning, teaching and innovation. The Gates Foundation feels strongly that teachers make the most difference in a child's educational success and that, as education leaders, we need to strive to put in place the resources to support them.

She is a strong proponent of Common Core standards and explained that the foundation is working with Pearson on new course design to overturn decades of “bad habits” and flawed policy to better support students for academic preparation and college knowledge.

They are also working to create an educator look-alike avatar which will allow teachers to group students to target instruction and intervention, multiplying their power to reach students in the classroom. The foundation will continue to look for ways to more effectively use technology in the classroom, not as a substitute for teachers, but as a way to empower children to have a range of affordable, high-quality tools at their fingertips.



To learn more about the Gates Foundation's education work, please visit <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/education>.