Given the impact that school leadership can have on student outcomes, providing every school with effective leadership should clearly be among the top priorities (Sun, 2011). As we move deeper into 21st century educational initiatives, some of the most difficult endeavors we are facing stem from three new and yet all-so-familiar acronyms: CCSS, LCFF and SBAC. School leadership requires a completely new set of skills.

To start, the successful implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) across approximately 1,000 districts and 10,000 schools in California is certainly no easy task. College and career readiness requires integrated systems across public and private spectrums. In addition, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) demands intensive and authentic involvement of stakeholders and local communities. Furthermore, local control calls for deep and meaningful engagement at every level of the organization.

Finally, we must become familiar with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and its new online assessment system aligned to CCSS. These three transformational initiatives have changed the role of every district and school leader overnight. They have repurposed the way in which districts and schools conduct their business.

The current challenges, coupled with the complexities of change in the educational landscape, have created a steep learning curve for even our most experienced leaders. So, imagine the compounded complexities new school leaders face as they attempt to learn and acclimate to the new organizational systems and culture. How can districts better prepare our new school leaders for success with the current vast complexities and urgencies? The answer: We must develop and implement systematic and meaningful induction systems for them. They need our guidance and support.

Making the case
Let us briefly share a story with an unfortunate ending: A new principal begins work in the San Bernardino City Unified School District at a school dealing with some demanding, multidimensional issues. The principal is navigating exhausting challenges, including:

• Understanding and leading change with CCSS, LCFF and SBAC;
• Learning the day-to-day intricacies of

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Community Engagement Plan. The district piloted the program with several new principal cohorts in late 2014-15 and early 2015-16 school years. The program serves to cultivate engagement and connections for new school leaders from the outset. Effective onboarding better prepares our new school leaders for success in these trying times.

Approach to onboarding

The SBCUSD Onboarding Program offers 10 packed days of purposeful, interactive activities focused on integrating and acculturating new school leaders into the district. It shares vital information, tools and approaches to propel short- and long-term successes in job satisfaction and performance. While there are numerous ways to structure an onboarding program, the recently developed framework in SBCUSD consists of four distinct elements: Orientation, Key Stakeholder Sessions, Peer Shadowing Opportunities, and Mentorship, Reflection and Planning.

While onboarding programs are typically complex and require many resources, such as time, substitutes, materials and funding, it was important to capture the overall structure in a simple framework. Each element serves a clear function in the overall goals and objectives of the program. The subsequent sections of this article provide a brief overview of each of the elements in the framework, describing sample activities and expected outcomes.

1. Orientation phase

Orientation is a vital phase in any onboarding program. Its purpose is to afford new school leaders a “big picture” understanding of the district, its strategic plans and its initiatives. This is the perfect chance to assimilate new leaders quickly into the district by sharing expectations, making new leaders feel comfortable and safe, and cultivating their enthusiasm as new members of the team.

Actor and author Harlan Hogan coined the well-known saying, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” A robust orientation communicates to a new hire that he or she is valued, important and worth an investment of time and resources. This early imprint naturally stimulates the highest level of commitment and engagement. Isn’t that a workforce all organizations strive to create?

Orientation in SBCUSD begins the first day on the job. Participants receive the 10-day schedule and all core materials used over the course of the program. The orientation spends a great deal of time introducing new employees to the “San Bernardino Way,” and gives a summary of the district’s key goals and objectives.

In 2012, the district began a strategic planning process resulting in a comprehensive Community Engagement Plan. This blueprint for success demonstrates the direc-
thoughts about onboarding

“Onboarding was an excellent opportunity for me to be exposed to the structural and procedural happenings in the district. I spent several days meeting with key individuals from around the district learning how things operate, touring the district’s warehouse, walking through the print shop. Each interaction I had laid a solid foundation for me as I began my role as an elementary principal in SBCUSD.”

- Ryan Rubio, principal

“The key stakeholder sessions provided an opportunity to interact with critical members of our organization. I knew this was the beginning of support that would benefit me as a new principal. I greatly appreciated the time I spent hearing the thoughts of my school team.”

- Martha Perez Martinez, principal

“The peer shadowing experience provided an amazing opportunity to interact with an administrator at their site. I saw, heard and felt the day in a life of an administrator. I found it extremely valuable to interact, observe and ask questions of our colleagues as we visited their campuses.”

- Amy Coker, principal

External stakeholder sessions deal with the key individuals who predominantly operate and work outside of the new school leader’s assigned school or department. They may be district employees or partners in the community. For example, external stakeholders for a new principal may include district directors, executive cabinet members, union presidents, leaders from local universities or representatives from district advisory committees. These individuals can provide critical resources, strategies and information about the requirements of the job.

The external stakeholder sessions typically last 45 minutes to an hour. The stakeholder delivers information and offers support, while the new school leader listens attentively, taking it all in. Obviously, it’s important to designate plenty of time for questions and answers.

Internal stakeholder sessions deal specifically with staff, students and parents within the new employee’s assigned school or department. As part of the onboarding process, employees must meet one-on-one with each staff member assigned to the school or department. In addition, new employees assigned to a specific school must conduct focus group sessions with select student and parent representatives.

The one-on-one and focus group sessions are very brief, maybe 10-15 minutes, and include only three simple questions: 1.) What are some opportunities for growth? 2.) What are the greatest challenges? 3.) If you were me, what would you focus on?

These three questions were adapted from Michael Watkins’ book, “The first 90 days.” Once all the internal stakeholders have offered their feedback to each question, new school leaders must examine the data, identify emerging themes, and develop an action plan based on them.

Consideration: Who are the key people in your district your new school leaders need to meet with early on?

3. Peer shadowing opportunities

We all know every district has high performing leaders who exemplify the beliefs, mindsets and work ethic that produce great results. Wouldn’t it be great if all of our newly appointed leaders exhibited those same attributes? We can facilitate this by providing new school leaders with opportunities during their onboarding program to shadow high performing peers.

Not only do new school leaders further job-specific technical skills by observing high performers in day-to-day action, but the new relationship can also lead to ongoing coaching and support through a con-

2. Key stakeholder sessions

Education is a people business. One cannot succeed without developing supportive, lasting relationships. The objective of the key stakeholder sessions is twofold. First, meetings with “external” stakeholders help new employees gain strong networks of support very quickly. Second, “internal” stakeholder sessions are structured so new hires learn about any potential opportunities, challenges and priorities. Both types of sessions lead to early engagement and a sense of belonging, which is why these sessions take up so many days of the onboarding program. It can pay big dividends.
tinual exchange of best practices. This can build a foundation for effective personal and professional growth.

In the SBCUSD Onboarding Program, new school leaders observe and interact one-on-one with two separate high performing individuals. These shadowing opportunities typically consist of two full days at pre-selected elementary and secondary schools. The newly appointed leaders can experience firsthand how to maneuver successfully through daily dealings. Expect questions to fly back and forth between the new leader and his or her high performing counterpart. When determining who visits whom, take into consideration school feeder patterns.

Peer shadowing helps onboarding participants quickly learn tips, strategies, and tools to move their work forward. But it also has benefits for their guides. Showcasing high performers for their work re-engages these seasoned leaders. Overall, the strategy creates a culture and climate in the district where the skills, knowledge and value of all employees are recognized and validated regularly.

Consideration: Which high performers do your new school leaders need to observe in action?

4. Mentorship, reflection & planning

John F. Kennedy observed, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.” Accordingly, the last element of the SBCUSD Onboarding Program includes a few culminating activities to reinforce the key learnings and processes each participant experienced during their 10 days of induction. The objective is to develop a thoughtful, practical written plan for success. We introduce participants to a mentor to assist with ongoing growth and development. The cost of employee turnover can be immense, so providing a mentor to offer new school leaders support is critical to the overall goals of the district and the long-term satisfaction of the employee.

Mentorship. All people benefit and grow through quality interactions with others. Mentorship strengthens capacity by cultivating the skills and knowledge of employees. Providing a mentor to new school leaders immediately is a powerful way to create an environment where new leaders feel comfortable sharing ideas and taking risks. This, in turn, increases outcomes and overall achievement. As the mentoring relationship develops, both school leaders mutually benefit by exchanging ideas and developing effective school leadership strategies.

Reflection and planning. In the final days of onboarding, new school leaders have structured time to reflect on their activities and learning. They are challenged to think deeply about their onboarding experiences. With his or her newfound awareness, each participant develops a personal leadership plan to guide his or her work for the first six to 12 months of the assignment. A major portion of the leadership plan arises from the opportunities, challenges and priorities extracted from the internal stakeholder meetings with staff, students and parents.

While we stress the saying “go slow to go fast” repeatedly to all new leaders, some small “quick win” opportunities can be included in the plans. The first several months on the job should predominantly focus on building lasting relationships with others and should regularly celebrate what is working well. Cultural and systemic change takes thoughtful and strategic decision making over time with people involved at a much deeper level.

The concluding activity of the SBCUSD Onboarding Program demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement of the program as a whole. All new leaders who have completed the program participate in an After Action Review (AAR). This is a brief, focused professional dialogue designed to provide feedback on intended and actual results. In other words, did the onboarding program produce the results the participants envisioned? How can the district improve the program? During this activity, the “graduates” answer three questions: 1.) What did you just experience in the onboarding program? 2.) What did you learn from those experiences? 3.) Based on your experiences and learning, what can the district do to improve the onboarding program?

The purpose of the AAR is two-fold. First, it is an opportunity to model an effective group process for improvement participants can use with their school staff. This promotes sharing and learning for continuous improvement. Second, it gives the district an opportunity to enhance the onboarding program by incorporating feedback and suggestions given by participants. The aim is to be the best at getting better, continuously. The resource “The change handbook” by Holman, Devane and Cady (2007) describes the AAR process, as well as many other methods for genuinely engaging small and large groups.

Consideration: Who will coach and mentor your new school leaders to ensure they have a leadership plan and the resources for success?

Next steps for onboarding

The SBCUSD Onboarding Program is still in its early stages of development. So far, we have piloted the program only with newly appointed principals. The ultimate goal is to extend onboarding incrementally to all new district employees, including certified and classified staff. We have to conduct large-scale implementation, especially in a district with nearly 8,000 employees, in a deliberate and strategic manner.

When the program is in full swing, all new hires will completely know, understand, and support the district’s core values and beliefs. This, in turn, will lead to increased productivity, engagement, and retention of employees. Most important, it will ultimately produce greater student outcomes.

Resources


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