
Voices from the Field:
A Summary of SAELP I
Demonstration Site Accomplishments

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I. Introduction and Overview

Rhode Island's State Action for Education Leadership Project I (SAELP I) began in June 2001 with funding from the Wallace Foundation. The purposes of the project were to:

1. Develop and implement a comprehensive system for attracting, supporting, and sustaining effective school and district leaders, particularly in urban districts.
2. Align and integrate leadership development with Rhode Island's comprehensive reform agenda.
3. Build a Policy Framework at the state and local level for school leaders.

The project design was based on the recognition that Rhode Island, despite many initiatives addressed to leadership development, lacked an integrating vision, structure, and process. The SAELP I project provided a focus and the resources to develop and implement a coherent statewide system embracing all key stakeholder organizations. A prominent component of the Rhode Island SAELP I project was its work with demonstration sites in seven local school districts and two statewide leadership development organizations.

The purposes of this study were to document the activities and accomplishments of the district demonstration sites and to identify their continuing challenges and needs that would guide the focus of ongoing SAELP II work. The report describes the study methods employed and the findings, conclusions, and recommendations based on the data obtained from the demonstration site administrators and the directors of the statewide organizations.

The scope of this demonstration site analysis does not encompass the overall statewide policy initiatives that were enacted by the Rhode Island General Assembly and the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education or the Rhode Island Board of Governors of Higher Education. These accomplishments are documented in several Wallace Foundation and National Consortia materials.

II. Evaluation Design

Study Participants

Study participants included key contacts in each of the seven districts that received SAELP I funds: Bristol-Warren, Cranston, Pawtucket, Newport, North Kingstown, West Warwick, and Woonsocket. These demonstration site coordinators typically were central office administrators. Additionally, the directors of two statewide education leadership development organizations, The Education Partnership and the Rhode Island Center for School Leadership, were interviewed. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) provided the researchers with district contact information and letters of introduction.

Methods

The primary data collection method employed was telephone interviews with the demonstration site coordinator. Interview questions were prepared and reviewed with the SAELP coordinator. In addition to interviews, researchers reviewed and analyzed relevant documents and data provided by the district contacts and the SAELP coordinator. These documents guided the use of site-specific probes that aligned with the interview questions. Interview questions were sent to the participants prior to the interview. Data collection activities were conducted between May 1 and 24, 2004.

Written transcripts were prepared from tape recordings and interview notes. These transcripts were organized and analyzed using a two-step coding procedure. First, the field notes and the interviews were organized and assigned descriptive codes. Second, pattern codes were used to identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. These themes were then organized within major categories. These categories were used to derive findings addressed to the study questions.

III. Findings

Data from the interviews are organized by the major study questions. The tables present identified themes and patterns and corresponding representative data (phrases and quotes from transcripts and field notes) from across the sites. Data from interviews with the directors of the two leadership organizations are presented in a separate section.

Question 1: What major actions were taken by the district(s) through SAELP I?

Districts reported that a range of actions was taken through the SAELP I program which targeted Leadership Policy development. The common thread of these actions was that they were intended to support and develop existing or new educational leadership programs and initiatives (Table 1). Both through interviews with district personnel and analyzing documents associated with the SAELP I, it is evident that districts recognize the centrality of leadership to accomplishing their mission to educate all students. Districts reported, for example, that SAELP I funding and pilot program support allowed them to begin to “move toward a comprehensive parent involvement policy;” “helped broaden the understanding of school leadership;” and to undertake “a major initiative to develop a secondary [level] leadership team.”

While the range of actions initiated and supported through SAELP I had a common focus, the means used to support and develop district leadership varied significantly. A sample of some of the actions taken through the pilot program include providing training to school committees and parents in the areas of effective leadership and school-community relations, partial funding for the training of principals in a district’s Institute for Learning initiative, and the training and deployment of “lead teachers” in each of a district’s elementary schools. A common theme that emerges from the analysis of these actions is that districts recognize the need to act to develop leadership and see their varied actions under SAELP I as first steps.

Table 1
Major District Actions

Themes	Interview Data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Actions aimed at building leadership at school, family, and community levels ▪ Significant variety of actions undertaken by districts through SAELP I 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “major initiatives” on secondary leadership teams ▪ “helped to broaden discussion of school leadership” ▪ “build district capacity for school leadership through aspiring principal program” ▪ “widely successful program” to develop cadre of parents as leaders

Question 2: What were the accomplishments of the SAELP pilot program for the district(s)?

Districts reported varied accomplishments as a result of their participation in the SAELP I pilot program. Not surprisingly, significant accomplishments identified by the districts correspond to emphasized initiatives and actions that were integrated into larger district policies and programs. One district, for example, reported significant success with two parent-involvement and leadership programs that were part of an ongoing district focus to build district-family partnerships. A second district reported that participation in SAELP I allowed them to develop district-wide communication systems to support an emerging vision of school leadership. Another district identified their work to build leadership at the secondary level as an important effort that was consistent with their overarching goal of developing a district vision of distributive leadership.

Districts also identified a second tier of accomplishments that were undertaken through the SAELP I program. These accomplishments represent “works in progress” or efforts that were not connected to larger district initiatives. One district used SAELP I funds to attempt to build school-community relationships through collaboration by all stake holders. A different district initiated professional development workshops for principals to develop their understanding of their expected roles. Still another district reported that SAELP I allowed them to begin to “raise the level of awareness” of the complexities of administrative leadership.

**Table 2
Major Accomplishments**

Themes	Interview Data
Improved Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Good link between Central Office and classroom teachers” • “Strategic plan developed through SAELP allowed more open communication with community members” • “Developed a process of communication for all new initiatives” • Networking of statewide leaders to focus leadership issues.
Improved Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional Development workshops held in districts • IFL Professional Development • “We gave professional development seminars right in the district on such topics as budgeting,...and how to make ethical decisions.”

Question 3: How has the district been impacted by the SAELP I program in terms of policy, programs, and practices?

Districts reported varied impacts by the SAELP I program in terms of policy, programs, and practices. While some districts reported that SAELP I was a “catalyst for change” and was impacting policy, programs and practices, the more common assessment was that SAELP I represented first steps and major impacts were “down the road.” Districts that identified the most substantial impacts also

acknowledged a focused vision of leadership development which merged with their SAELP I initiatives. Efforts such as providing mentors to all newly hired principals, designing an effective evaluation tool, and training a cadre of parent leaders are reported as making a difference in these districts.

The majority of the districts report that while efforts undertaken through the SAELP I program did impact their districts, much more needs to be done to develop school leadership in the areas of policy, programs and especially practices. As stated by one respondent, a vision of instructional leadership is developing in the district, but they “still don’t know how to move principals and teachers forward.” A different district reported success with developing a model of distributive leadership at the elementary level, but remains challenged to duplicate this success at the secondary level. While another district acknowledged the success of a leadership development program to meet the needs of a limited number of individuals, new initiatives are needed to get at the “general populace of teachers in the district.”

Table 3
Impact on Policies and Programs

Themes	Interview Data
Impact on Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Led to an evaluation tool for administrators and brought to the school committee for passage • Led to goal-setting with regard to a new teacher evaluation tool • Use of Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders rather than just disciplinarians.
Impact on Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Using Distributive Leadership model” Teacher leaders coming to the forefront alongside administrators in instructional leadership • Beginning to “get at conversation” of building principals and department chairs as instructional leaders • More support of the new initiatives among the “general populace of teachers in district” • “SAELP helped us more forward with requirement of NCLB and the need for parent involvement”
Impact on Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of Instructional Personnel differently • Use of Learning Walk Training and Nine Principals of Learning in the classroom settings.

Question 4: What challenges have you faced in meeting your SAELP objectives and how did the district address these challenges?

The most frequently identified areas of challenge expressed by district SAELP contacts were the scope of the work to be done to build school leadership and the actual implementation of identified programs. Unanimously, demonstration site coordinators could articulate what their districts’ vision for leadership – instructional verses managerial, distributive verses unitary, but acknowledged the gap between where they wanted to be and where they were. Several districts, for example, reported that they have not met their objectives to translate this emerging vision of leadership to their school committees. Many districts

also identified an attitudinal divide between levels – elementary verses secondary, and location – central office verses school, as significant unfinished work to get all participants to accept the changing definition of school leadership.

Equally challenging for many of the sites was the implementation of SAELP I programs. Several districts reported that SAELP timelines for program development, implementation, and usage of funds were “problematic and not realistic.” Other districts also frequently identified the need to network¹ and connect in order to see working models of effective leadership and to support the development of their own leaders. Districts also acknowledged the use and availability of personnel to provide substitutes and coverage to implement SAELP I programs as a further challenge. Districts report that their efforts through SAELP I to develop leadership are “a step in the right direction,” but recognized that challenges remain.

**Table 4
Challenges**

Themes	Interview Data
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “ Getting all the state and federal mandates rolled out” • SAELP timelines and guidelines for spending program funds were not “user friendly” and impacted program’s effectiveness
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Need help changing attitudes at the secondary level teachers • Need help changing “attitudes of School Committees” • “Slow pace of change” in changing attitudes of secondary leadership and using a variety of efforts and resources to produce the change.
Personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Using instructional leadership personnel differently” • Substitute teachers to replace those shadowing principals
Other Governing Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “RIDE should give school committees training in their responsibilities • Emerging and changing nature of SAELP limited initial support

Question 5: How can the Rhode Island Department of Education help the district as it moves forward to address these issues?

Districts reported that RIDE is helping them move forward to address leadership issues; they also stated that more help is needed to support districts in this work. Furthermore, districts requested more resources to develop leadership but also flexibility to adapt this support to their individual needs. Several districts cited the toolkits that accompanied the recent roll out of the Grade Level Expectations as an example of effective support RIDE can provide to districts. Other districts also requested mechanisms to

¹ Network activities were initiated prior to the end of SAELP I.

connect districts with each other to support their work to develop leaders: mentor networks, cross-district observations of effective leadership, and regionally available professional development.

While districts requested such additional support, they also emphasized the need for flexibility and consideration for district realities. More than one district asked “what RIDE was willing to let go” as the district struggled to meet all of the demands placed upon it by state and federal regulations. Such comments may indicate that the districts see leadership development initiatives has one more thing to be accomplished rather than as something that advance their accomplishment of other federal and state programs and requirements. One district reported that it would like models of effective leadership that it can adapt to its local circumstances.

Table 5
RIDE Assistance

Themes	Interview Data
Flexible support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide good examples of leadership. • “Need to connect all parties to maximize efforts • “Provide models of other programs to build leaders”

Question 6: Based on your experience with SEALP I, do you have any recommendations you can share with the Rhode Island Department of Education as they prepare for SAELP II?

Districts recognized the support that RIDE has already provided and offered several recommendations for future assistance. The most consistent recommendation offered was for RIDE to create mechanisms for districts to share what they have learned through SAELP I so they “don’t have to reinvent the wheel.” Specifically, districts would like access to what is working in other districts to develop school leadership and means to observe effective leadership in action. Districts also requested that RIDE provide innovative and effective professional development on leadership to district and school committee personnel. Other districts also recommended that RIDE continue to use its role to “connect all players” to develop school leadership: statewide organizations, higher education, professional development providers, and individual school districts.

Table 6
Recommendations from the Field

Themes	Interview Data
RIDE leadership and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District to District sharing/articulation: connecting the sites to maximize efforts • “Showcase” what others have done • Continue to push a vision of effective leadership in State • Create opportunities for principals to observe/learn from their peers. • Need for principal mentorship throughout the state

Statewide Organization Perspectives

In addition to district contacts at the seven demonstration sites, interviews were also conducted with representatives of two statewide organizations (The Education Partnership and Rhode Island Center for School Leadership) that have participated in SAELP I to further document the work of the program to build educational leadership in the state. While the questions posed in these interviews were necessarily different, their focus is related:

1. What were the accomplishments of SAELP I?
2. What challenges were evident in SAELP I?
3. How has RIDE been able to support the work of SAELP I?
4. What has been learned from SAELP I and how can SAELP II benefit from this learning?

Like interviews conducted at the demonstration site level, contacts were provided with interview questions in advance and interviews were conducted by telephone. (Interview questions for the statewide organizations are contained in Appendix B.)

SAELP I contacts from the statewide organizations reported that leadership is a critical issue and one that until recently has not received the attention it deserves in the state. They also identified their initial expectations for the SAELP program to begin to “connect and network all interested organizations and parties.” Respondents reported that several accomplishments have resulted from SAELP I. Networks that have connected RIDE, higher education, and other preparation partnerships, individual demonstration site accomplishments, as well as legislative work to address leadership issues were cited as significant examples. Although noting that SAELP I represented a “prime opportunity” to connect interested parties, the statewide organizations acknowledged that effectively bringing together these parties with local school districts has not been accomplished and remains a continuing challenge. Other challenges reported include the slowness of desired change, the substantial scope of the work to be done, and timelines for the implementation for SAELP I.

Interviews with representatives from the statewide organizations also focused on the support RIDE was able to provide to SAELP I districts, what SAELP I has revealed about the issue of leadership, and suggestions for RIDE to consider as it plans for SAELP II. Interviewees, however, did cite efforts made by RIDE to connect the local districts with support in and out of the Department as a necessary first step.

SAELP I has generated important understandings about educational leadership in the state according to these representatives. SAELP I work has revealed the scope of the challenge, the need to join together to effectively address the issues, and that “SAELP could be a hub for leadership development.” Their suggestions for SAELP II work include continuing the work of SAELP I to support the development of effective school, district, and school committee leadership, extending opportunities for networking where districts, the Department, and statewide organizations can combine talents and share successes and resources, and to maintain educational leadership as a priority issue in the state.

IV. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The data obtained in this study revealed that:

- Demonstration sites have implemented a very diverse set of initiatives primarily focused on principals and teacher leaders.
- SAELP I activities have increased district recognition of the importance of developing leaders and leadership.

- Few of the demonstration site initiatives actually focused on outcomes in terms of changes in performance.
- Accomplishments as a result of these activities were equally diverse.
- Several challenges were reported, including logistics and working with school committees.
- Demonstration sites tend to see SAELP leadership development initiatives as part of RIDE's many program requirements rather than as a means for more effectively addressing those requirements.

Conclusions

It appears that the relatively small investment of SAELP I funds resulted in considerable activity in the demonstration sites. Every site reported conducting some leadership activities and was able to identify specific accomplishments. The consensus, however, is that there is much more to be done with respect to both design and implementation.

Strategic direction. Perhaps the most general accomplishment is that the project established leadership development as a statewide priority and brought together the key players from state organizations, institutions of higher education, districts, and the Department of Education to address that priority collaboratively. Although the demonstration site coordinators were pleased with the State's commitment of funds to support their own leadership development activities, they were not clear about the strategic direction for leadership development in Rhode Island. They realize that their activities to date do not constitute a system for providing education, training, and support services for district and school leaders.

Communication and networking. Although communication was initially fragmented, it did improve as the SAELP I project matured. Considerable progress was made in bringing together district administrators responsible for leadership development and higher education institutions responsible for leadership preparation programs. Indeed, SAELP I provided the first setting in which the directors of leadership preparation programs could come together to share what they were doing and discuss collaborative work. For example, there was progress in linking district leaders and higher education administrators responsible for leadership preparation programs.

Despite these SAELP-sponsored forums, it appears that the demonstration sites operated independently. Most often they did not know what their colleagues in other demonstration sites were doing and there were few initiatives to network across sites. It is not clear, however, whether districts were prepared to devote considerable time and resources to contributing to such a network.

RIDE leadership. The districts and the statewide organizations wish for a stronger and more active role by the Department of Education through much expanded communication, more aggressive networking, and technical assistance to districts in designing and implementing comprehensive education, training, and support services for district and school leaders. District by district efforts, while encouraging district support, may not yield the desired result of a strategic framework and comprehensive system of leadership development aligned with the State's reform agenda. It appears that there is a readiness, at least among the seven demonstration sites, for more deliberate work on such a system. Such collaborative work will require that districts commit resources and energy to the effort.

Recommendations

Based on these findings and conclusions, RIDE should consider these recommendations for its SAELP II work:

1. Work with districts to create a shared vision, principles, and policies regarding leadership development and connect this strategic framework to that for RIDE's education reform program.
2. Continue and enhance sharing across districts. Establish communities of practice around common interests. Link the demonstration sites more closely to Providence LEAD initiatives. Investigate the use of Web sites and other information technology tools for supporting such communities.
3. Focus SAELP II resources on helping districts to develop education, training, and support systems for leaders and leadership. Build their capacity to design and implement such systems and integrate them with their education reform initiatives.
4. Increase attention to helping districts provide education, training, and support services to school committee members.
5. Expand RIDE's capacity to lead and support district efforts to strengthen leadership development.