



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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### 'Critical Questions' Series February, 2011

## What is the Knowing-Doing Gap?

Leadership is a conflict process. The central conflict in education is that not all students are learning at levels that they could be. From a systems and organizational perspective, it is a great mystery as to why our knowledge of what needs to be done frequently fails to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Current research is now capable of explaining specific actions, practices and behaviors of superintendents that produce high levels of student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Despite the fact that we can access quality information about how to lead and shape our organizations, many leaders fail to implement the desired change. Why this happens is in constant flux. It could stem directly from a basic lack of awareness of change, of how to engage staff, the purpose and rationale for change, or the aptitude to productively employ others in change initiatives (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Horsley & Kaser, 1999). Other barriers to acting on knowledge are external to the superintendent. These forces may lay with the school board, the union, or state and federal requirements that present unique challenges of their own. Sometimes the problems they face are results of past actions taken to solve them. Facing these issues is not only difficult, but can be discouraging when other solutions were inadequate to solve the problem. Doug Reeves (2006) states that, despite these advancements in research, we are still at an impasse. "One inescapable conclusion from school reform research, however, is that evidence alone is not enough. We must confront the knowing-doing gap" (Reeves, 2006, p. 90).

The knowing-doing gap exists because we hold ourselves hostage with our own thinking, and also by the influences in our organizations which craft our thinking. Change is predicated on a leader's ability to influence and craft the behaviors and structure which exist within the organization. This means that we must systemically confront the brutal facts of traditionally structured schools, address the assumptions and status quo of the existing culture, establish new conceptual frameworks, and identify new roles for improving the manner in which we collaborate as professionals and educate students.

Identifying these barriers will provide the insight necessary to act on good knowledge. By seeing the whole picture, we can engage new possibilities that have untapped potential for change. With insight into the challenges of administration and educational policy, we should be able to bridge the gap between what we know are sound educational practices and our ability to effectively implement these practices for the benefit of kids.

If the education of children is a paramount commitment in our society, it then becomes a moral imperative incumbent upon superintendents to ensure systemic access and equity for all students. The question is whether or not we are acting on this premise. Understanding the knowing-doing framework allows a reflective and open minded individual the opportunity to leverage action for maximum benefit. It allows us to answer the question of what it would look like if we really meant it.

The central question of understanding how to close the knowing-doing gap is currently a doctoral dissertation at Seattle University. If you are interested in contributing to this research either as a superintendent in the state of Washington or an educational administrator interested in being a part of the pilot study for reliability and validity, contact:

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