

**Washington State Leadership Academy  
Problem Statement Assignment Notes  
September 25-26, 2008**

*Prior to coming to the first institute, your WSLA coach worked with you to develop a brief (one -- two page) initial statement of the problem or challenge you've identified for your work this year. We've asked you specifically to identify a problem or challenge connected to closing achievement gaps, and improving student learning. You are bringing this initial statement to this first institute session, and you now have the chance to reflect on the problem in greater depth. Between now and the next session, your team should examine data that further informs your initial problem, and possibly helps you to get clearer about the root cause. By the first of November, your team should finalize a version of the statement that identifies the problem of practice you intend to work on this year. A few notes follow to help with approaching this assignment and team discussions leading toward its completion.*

- A useful problem statement:
  - Identifies a learning issue, or achievement gap issue for students
  - Frames the challenge as a question to be answered
  - Avoids embedding blame in stating the problem to be solved
  - Avoids embedding pre-conceived solutions in stating the problem
  - Considers "root causes" that led to the problem
  - Considers the professional learning needed to help solve the student learning issue
  - Considers the system learning that is needed to help solve the student and professional learning issue
  
- Identify a learning problem or challenge:
  - What information do you have that sheds light on the problem? (What data are you looking at, and what do those data tell you)?
  - What information (data) do we still need to get that might continue to help us clarify the problem?
  - Is there a professional learning challenge associated with the student learning issue you have identified? What is it, and how do you know?
  - Is the problem a system-wide issue? Are there different versions of the problem across levels of schools in the system?
  - Which students & teachers will you follow this year that represent those who are most impacted by the problem you intend to solve? How will you track their learning?

**ASSIGNMENT: Write a final brief (one-two page) revised description of the learning problem you intend to focus on this year that addresses the following questions. You may want to use the attached template to help with this process.**

- *In your work at your district right now, what is the pressing learning problem you will work on this year? How do you know it is a problem (what data are you relying on)?*
- *What are the root causes of this learning problem?*
- *What are you doing about it now?*
- *What more do you need to know to understand the problem as fully as possible?*
- *What would be different, and for which students, if the problem were solved?*

Please send your draft statement to both your coach, your regional instructors, and email a copy to Mike Copland ([mcopland@u.washington.edu](mailto:mcopland@u.washington.edu)) by November 3, 2008. You can expect to receive feedback on your statement by the November regional WSLA meeting.

**PROBLEM FRAMING TEMPLATE – WSLA**

**Teams may find it helpful to answer these questions in developing their 1-2 page statement.**

**1. In your work at your district right now, what is the pressing learning problem you will work on this year? How do you know it is a problem (what data are you relying on)?** *The statement of the problem can be as simple as a one-sentence question, using the prompts from the assignment sheet. List out your data sources that have helped you figure out the problem to this point. For example, these may be data such as standardized test score trends for particular groups of students, district assessments, classroom walk-through data, survey information, etc.*

**2. What are the root causes of this learning problem?** *Here you may only have some hunches that need to be more fully explored. Write down what you think might be contributing, and try to stay focused on aspects of the work that you can influence. For example, your district may serve a lot of poor children, but you may not have a lot of influence over that aspect of students' lives. Try to focus on the root causes you can influence.*

**3. What are you doing about it now?** *It is likely that you have work going on already that is focused on the problem you hope to solve. For example, if your problem of practice has something to do with improving writing skills for a particular group of elementary students, it is likely that you have existing curricula, instructional practices, assessments, and perhaps professional development that focuses in writing already. What do you know about how all of those existing strategies are working?*

**4. What more do you need to know to understand the problem as fully as possible?** *What often happens for teams who are attempting to define and work on a problem of practice, is that as they dig into their data, they find the data provide an incomplete picture. This can lead to further data gathering and study to help inform a deeper understanding. For example, a district working on improving writing skills for a particular group of students may find that consideration of only the standardized test scores for those students provides an incomplete picture of the actual learning problem. This might cause the team to gather school- or classroom-based evidence of student work to help deepen their understanding of the teaching and learning issues involved with writing improvement.*

**5. What would be different, and for which students, if the problem were solved?** *Say what you hope to accomplish in working on the problem you've identified. Choose some students whose learning you want to improve this year, and plan for how you'll track their progress over the course of the year.*