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Role of Principal Leadership in Improving Student Achievement

By: [The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement](#)



The most influential educational leaders are the principal and superintendent, and their leadership is inextricably linked to student performance. This article looks at the basics of good leadership and offers practical suggestions.

School and district leadership has been the focus of intense scrutiny in recent years as researchers try to define not only the qualities of effective leadership but the impact of leadership on the operation of schools, and even on student achievement. A recently published literature review titled [How Leadership Influences Student Learning](#) contributes to this growing body of knowledge by examining the links between student achievement and educational leadership practices.

Authors Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) make two important claims. First, "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 7). Second, "leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are needed most" (p. 7). Without a powerful leader, troubled schools are unlikely to be turned around. The authors stress that "many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst" (p. 7).

The review, commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, is the first step in a five-year, 180-school study of the links between student achievement and educational leadership practices. The planned study is a joint effort of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto and the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement. The foundation's first report could be released as early as November.

This article summarizes what the review reveals about the basics of successful education leadership and offers practical suggestions for their implementation.

The Basics of Successful Leadership

The authors warn that it is tempting to get caught up in defining the many adjectives often used to describe leadership in education literature (e.g., participative, instructional) but note that ultimately these descriptions focus on style, not substance. A more productive strategy, they contend, is to examine the following three sets of practices that make up the basic core of successful leadership:

- Setting direction.
- Developing people.

- Redesigning the organization.

The authors acknowledge that "rarely are—[these] practices sufficient for leaders aiming to significantly improve student learning in their schools. But without them, not much would happen" (p. 10).

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Setting Direction

Examining the Evidence.

The review suggests that leaders who set a clear sense of direction have the greatest impact. If these leaders help to develop among their staff members a shared understanding of the organization and its goals and activities, this understanding becomes the basis for a sense of purpose or vision. The authors emphasize that "having such goals helps people make sense of their work and enables them to find a sense of identity for themselves within their work context" (p. 10).

The authors suggest that school improvement plans can be a means of setting direction. "It's difficult for schools to make progress without something to focus their attention, without any goals," says coauthor Kenneth Leithwood, a University of Toronto education professor. "Improvement plans are a rational model about how to act purposefully in schools."

Practical Application.

Effective principals understand direction setting. They know that an investment of time is required to develop a shared understanding of what the school should "look like" and what needs to be done to get it there. They know that teachers and other staff included in identifying goals are much more likely to be motivated to achieve those goals. These sentiments are echoed by Doris Candelarie, executive director of School Effectiveness in Brighton, Colorado, and former principal of Vikan Middle School in Brighton. "We set school goals, individual goals, team goals. That builds community and the spirit around it"(Center for Collaborative Education, 2003). Teachers who are asked to engage in open and honest communication with the principal, to contribute their suggestions, and to voice their concerns are much more likely to follow the direction set by their leader. Further information about organizing, planning, implementing and sustaining reform can be found in The Center's policy briefs at www.centerforcsri.org

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Developing People

Examining the Evidence. Much of the focus in education literature regarding the principal's role in developing staff members has been on instructional leadership, which emphasizes the principal's role in providing guidance that improves teachers' classroom practices. Philip Hallinger's instructional leadership model has been the most researched. It consists of three sets of leadership dimensions—defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate—within which 10 specific leadership practices are delineated (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Now, in addition to instructional leadership, the review finds that researchers also are paying close attention to what is being termed a leader's emotional intelligence—his or her ability and willingness to be "tuned in" to employees as people. "Recent evidence suggests that emotional intelligence displayed, for example, through a leader's personal attention to an employee and through the utilization of the employee's capacities, increases the employee's enthusiasm and optimism, reduces frustration, transmits a sense of mission and indirectly increases performance (McCull-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002)" (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 24).

The authors cite the following more specific leadership practices that help develop people:

- Stimulate them intellectually.
- Provide them with individualized support.
- Provide them with an appropriate model.

Practical Application. Schools have interpreted these research findings in a variety of practical ways. Group book studies, lesson study in critical friends' groups, professional development sessions at conferences, or visits to high-performing schools all provide intellectual stimulation. At Deborah Hoffman's Franklin Elementary School in Madison, Wisconsin, for example, teachers participate in book groups that focus on race and student achievement. They also are encouraged to grow intellectually by pursuing additional certification in English as a second language (Hoffman, 2005).

Developing people through individualized support can take many forms in schools. Literacy or math coaches can model lessons, observe classes, and provide constructive feedback to teachers. Teachers also benefit from peer observations, debriefing sessions with colleagues, and feedback from the principal. New teachers in particular gain support from mentor teachers who are carefully assigned to assist them in the first few years of teaching. At Eastgate Middle School in Kansas City, Missouri, Principal Tim Mattson created a new position for an instructional coach whose job was to serve as a mentor for new teachers and help experienced teachers to develop strong leadership skills as well as implement effective reading strategies based on their examination of student work (Center for Collaborative Education, 2003).

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Redesigning the Organization

Examining the evidence

The review notes that the organization teachers and principals operate in can sometimes thwart their best intentions to use effective practices. In some contexts, the authors observe, high-stakes testing has "encouraged a drill-and-practice form of instruction among teachers who are perfectly capable of developing deep understanding on the part of their students" (p. 11). Furthermore, "extrinsic financial incentives for achieving school performance targets, under some conditions, can erode teachers' intrinsic commitments to the welfare of their students" (p. 11).

Successful educational leaders resist these and other organizational pitfalls. Instead, they are purposeful about turning their schools into effective organizations. They do this by developing and counting on contributions from many others in their organizations to do the following:

- Strengthen the school's culture.
- Modify organizational structures.
- Build collaborative processes.

Practical application

What does this process of redesigning the organization look like on the ground? Principals strengthen school culture when they clearly and consistently articulate high expectations for all students, including subgroups that are too often marginalized and blamed for schools not making adequate yearly progress. At an Alliance for Excellent Education event in August, Mel Riddile, principal of J.E.B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Virginia, eloquently addressed this issue: "We have a moral and ethical imperative to educate every student. [If] we let them languish in mediocrity, shame on us" (Riddile, 2005). Principals can modify organizational structures, for instance, by changing schedules to ensure that teachers share common planning time and use that time to discuss improving instruction. This kind of restructuring also reinforces the use of collaborative processes among teachers. Given sufficient time and consistent messages about the value of collaboration, teachers learn to trust their colleagues and are more willing to share their best practices and challenges.

Redesigning the organization from the inside out requires that leaders identify and capitalize on the competence of others and both model and require collaboration. As author Carl Glickman (2003) observed: "In successful schools, principals aren't threatened by the wisdom of others; instead, they cherish it by distributing leadership" (p. 56).

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Broad Goals for School Leaders

This literature review on educational leadership notes that current evidence allows us to infer some broad goals for school leaders. The authors acknowledge that further study will reveal more about what is needed to identify specific leadership practices that lead to the achievement of these goals. They suggest that principals do the following:

- Create and sustain schools that can compete with private, charter and magnet schools.
- Empower others to make significant decisions.
- Provide instructional guidance.
- Develop and implement strategic and school improvement plans.

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Conclusion

How Leadership Influences Student Learning emphasizes that the most influential educational leaders remain the principal and superintendent, and that their leadership is inextricably linked to student performance. Having examined a host of factors that contribute to what students learn at school, the authors conclude that the contribution of leadership is second in strength only to classroom instruction. And, effective leadership has the greatest impact where it is most needed—in the nation's challenged schools. These facts make the case, the authors assert, for improving not only the recruitment and training of school principals but also their ongoing development and evaluation. In addition, they cite the need for expanded study of how leadership in other areas of the school community—such as teacher leadership—can contribute to student achievement.

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References

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