



Division A of AERA

This is a shortened version of *What We Know About Successful School Leadership*, prepared for the Task Force on Developing Research in Educational Leadership. It will appear in 2003. The task force was established in 2000 by Division A (Administration) of the American Educational Research Association, with the charge to promote and encourage high-quality research in educational leadership. William A. Firestone and Carolyn Riehl serve as co-chairs of the task force. The University Council for Educational Administration and the Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University also collaborate with the task force. We are grateful for the financial support provided by the Laboratory for Student Success through a subcontract to the Center for Educational Policy Analysis of Rutgers University.

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The Task Force on Developing Research in Educational Leadership is currently preparing a series of working papers on substantive areas of concern, ranging from the leader's role in instructional improvement, to issues in the recruitment and preparation of educational leaders, to methodological approaches for research in educational leadership. These papers will summarize key current knowledge and will highlight significant research questions that need to be addressed in the future in order to help improve educational leadership practice and policy.

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WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Scratch the surface of an excellent school and you are likely to find an excellent principal. Peer into a failing school and you will find weak leadership. That, at least, is the conventional wisdom. Leaders are thought to be essential for high-quality education. But is this indeed true—and if so, exactly how does leadership work?

Amidst the seeming certainty that leadership matters, there is much that we do not yet understand about effective educational leadership. However, the knowledge base about leadership is constantly growing. In this brief, we present a summary of key, well-documented understandings about leadership at the school level. This knowledge can be used with confidence to guide leadership practice, policy, and research. It can help address concerns about school leaders' preparation and performance. It also can provide a good starting point for dialogue with diverse audiences about the future of educational leadership.

WHY THE RENEWED EMPHASIS ON EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP?

OUTCOMES ARE CRUCIAL

Local, state, and federal achievement standards for ambitious learning for all children have changed the landscape of educational accountability. Pressure is on actors at all levels, from students themselves to teachers, principals, and superintendents. In these times of heightened concern for student learning, school leaders are being held accountable for how well teachers teach and how much students learn.

THE ENVIRONMENT IS MORE COMPLEX

Educational leaders must guide their schools through the challenges posed by an increasingly complex environment. Curriculum standards, achievement benchmarks, programmatic requirements, and other policy directives from many sources generate complicated and unpredictable requirements for schools. Principals must respond to increasing diversity in student characteristics, including cultural background and immigration status, income disparities, physical and mental disabilities, and variation in learning capacities. They must manage new collaborations with other social agencies that serve children. Rapid developments in technologies for teaching and communication require adjustments in the internal workings of schools. These are just a few of the conditions that make schooling more challenging and leadership more essential.



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RESEARCH AND BELIEFS STRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

A growing body of research evidence documents the effects of leadership. Moreover, anecdotal and popular accounts from business and other ventures tout the value of leadership. Some observers argue that this fascination with leadership merely reflects a general human desire to be in control of one's situation. Others say that while the impact of good leadership may be difficult to determine, the effects of poor leadership are easy to see. In any case, fascination with leadership abounds.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Like other complex human activities, leadership is difficult to pin down. It might even be unwise to narrow it unnecessarily. Nonetheless, a working definition can provide a useful frame of reference.

At the core of most definitions of leadership are two functions: *providing direction and exercising influence*. Leaders mobilize and work with others to achieve shared goals. This definition has several important implications:

- Leaders do not merely impose goals on followers, but work with others to create a shared sense of purpose and direction. In public education, the ends are increasingly centered on student learning, including both the development of academic knowledge and skills and the learning of important values and dispositions.
- Leaders primarily work through and with other people. They also help to establish the conditions that enable others to be effective. Thus, leadership effects on school goals are indirect as well as direct.
- Leadership is a function more than a role. Although leadership is often invested in—or expected of—persons in positions of formal authority, leadership encompasses a set of functions that may be performed by many different persons in different roles throughout a school.

In sum, school leaders are those persons, occupying various roles in the school, who provide direction and exert influence in order to achieve the school's goals. Formal leaders—those persons in formal positions of authority—are genuine leaders only to the extent that they fulfill these functions. Leadership functions can be carried out in many different ways, depending on the individual leader, the context, and the nature of the goals being pursued.

RESEARCH-BASED CONCLUSIONS ABOUT SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Major findings from research on school leadership can be summarized in the following five claims.

1. Leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers' instruction.

To learn well, students need access to high-quality instruction and a well-crafted curriculum. After that, they benefit most of all from the positive effects of strong school leadership.

Case studies of exceptional schools, especially those that succeed beyond expectations, provide detailed portraits of leadership. These studies indicate that school leaders influence learning primarily by galvanizing effort around ambitious goals and by establishing conditions that support teachers and that help students succeed.

Large-scale quantitative studies of schooling conclude that the effects of leadership on student learning are small but educationally significant. Although leadership explains only about three to five percent of the variation in student learning across schools, this effect is actually nearly one-quarter of the total effect of all school factors. In these studies, as in case studies, leadership effects appear to be mostly indirect. That is, leaders influence student learning by helping to promote vision and goals, and by ensuring that resources and processes are in place to enable teachers to teach well.

2. Currently, administrators and teacher leaders provide most of the leadership in schools, but other potential sources of leadership exist.

Much research focuses on the formal leadership of school principals. This research finds that principals exert leadership through constellations of actions that coalesce around different “models” of leadership, including transformational, instructional, moral, or participative leadership.

A growing body of research examines the leadership practices of teachers, either as informal leaders without a formal leadership role, or as formal leaders in roles such as department head, coordinator of a special program, or teacher mentor. While empirical evidence is limited, research suggests that teacher leaders can help other teachers to embrace goals, to understand the changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning, and to work together towards improvement.

As flatter, team-based, more organic structures begin to predominate over hierarchical structures in schools, especially through site-based management initiatives, more attention is being paid to the kinds of leadership that can be distributed across many roles and functions in the school. In addition to teachers and administrators, parents and students are important potential sources of leadership.

3. A core set of leadership practices form the “basics” of successful leadership and are valuable in almost all educational contexts.

Three broad categories of practices have been identified as important for leadership success in almost all settings and organizations. They are *setting directions*, *developing people*, and *developing the organization*. Each category encompasses more specific competencies, orientations, and considerations.

Setting Directions

This dimension of leadership practice includes actions aimed at developing goals for schooling and inspiring others with a vision of the future.

- **Identifying and articulating a vision.** Effective educational leaders help their schools to develop or endorse visions that embody the best thinking about teaching and learning. School leaders inspire others to reach for ambitious goals.
- **Creating shared meanings.** Because people usually base their actions on how they understand things, educational leaders help to create shared meanings and understandings to support the school’s vision. School

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legitimacy and effectiveness are enhanced when both internal members and the broader community share clear understandings about students, learning, and schooling.

- **Creating high performance expectations.** Effective leaders convey their expectations for quality and high performance. They help others see the challenging nature of the goals being pursued. They sharpen perceptions of the gap between what the school aspires to and what is presently being accomplished. Effective expressions of high expectations help people see that what is being expected is in fact possible.
- **Fostering the acceptance of group goals.** Effective educational leaders promote cooperation and assist others to work together toward common goals. In the past, teachers have often worked under conditions of relative autonomy, but new models of schools as professional learning communities emphasize the importance of shared goals and effort.
- **Monitoring organizational performance.** Effective school leaders assess how well the school is performing along multiple indicators and use that information as goals are developed and reviewed. This requires astute skills for gathering and interpreting information, as well as a tradition of inquiry and reflection. Successful school leaders ask critical and constructive questions, emphasize the use of systematic evidence, and encourage careful monitoring of both teaching and pupil progress.
- **Communicating.** Skillful leaders focus attention on key aspects of the school's vision and communicate the vision clearly and convincingly. They invite interchange with multiple stakeholders through participatory communication strategies. They frame issues in ways that will lead to productive discourse and decision making.

Developing People

Most work in schools is, of course, accomplished through the efforts of people. Effective educational leaders influence the development of human resources in their schools.

- **Offering intellectual stimulation.** Effective leaders encourage reflection and challenge their staff to examine assumptions about their work and rethink how it can be performed. They provide information and resources to help people see discrepancies between current and desired practices. They enable teachers and others to understand and gain mastery over the complexities of necessary changes.
- **Providing individualized support.** Most educational improvement requires significant levels of change for the individuals involved. Successful educational leaders show respect for staff and concern about their feelings and needs. Leaders provide incentives and structures to promote change, as well as opportunities for individual learning and appropriate means for monitoring progress toward improvement.
- **Providing an appropriate model.** Effective school leaders set examples for staff and others to follow that are consistent with the school's values and goals. By modeling desired dispositions and actions, leaders enhance others' beliefs about their own capacities and their enthusiasm for change.

Developing the Organization

School leaders attend to aspects of the school as an organization and a community, with consideration of internal processes and external relationships. Effective leaders enable the school to function as a professional learning community to support and sustain the performance of all key workers, including teachers as well as students.

- **Strengthening school culture.** Effective school leaders help develop school cultures that embody shared norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes and that promote mutual caring and trust among all members. School culture sets a tone and context within which work is undertaken and goals are pursued.
- **Modifying organizational structure.** School leaders monitor and adjust the structural organization of the school, including how tasks are assigned and performed, the use of time and space, the acquisition and allocation of equipment, supplies, and other resources, and all of the routine operating procedures of the school. Organizational structure is the skeletal framework within which people carry out their work. Structure can enhance or hinder individual performance and the accomplishment of school goals. Effective educational leaders direct structural changes that will establish positive conditions for teaching and learning.
- **Building collaborative processes.** Educational leaders enhance the performance of their schools by providing opportunities for staff to participate in decision making about issues that affect them and for which their knowledge is crucial. In this way, leaders help others to shape the school in ways that can accomplish shared goals and address individual concerns as well.
- **Managing the environment.** Effective leaders work with representatives from the school's environment, including parents, community members, business and government liaisons, and influential others. They pursue positive interactions with the goals of fostering shared meanings, garnering resources and support, and establishing productive inter-organizational relationships. To effectively position their schools within their environments, and to respond to legitimate concerns from parents and others, educational leaders are client-centered, proactive, and focused.

While mastery of these basics provides no guarantee that a leader's work will be successful in a particular school context, lack of mastery likely guarantees failure. A successful leader needs to do more but cannot do less.

4. Successful school leaders respond productively to challenges and opportunities created by the accountability-oriented policy context in which they work.

Every school is in some fashion unique, and successful leaders address the particularities of their contexts appropriately. However, large numbers of schools share special challenges and opportunities that require effective responses from educational leaders. One such instance is the rise in different kinds of policies designed to hold schools more accountable. Leadership practices that help schools succeed when they confront various forms of accountability mechanisms may include, for example:

- **Creating and sustaining a competitive school.** This is important when choice options and market conditions eliminate monopolies over enrollments and require schools to compete for students.
- **Empowering others to make significant decisions.** When accountability mechanisms require stakeholders to have a greater voice in school governance, leaders implement strategies that help others participate effectively.
- **Providing instructional guidance.** When accountability policies stress standards for professional performance for teachers and others in the school, leaders need to stay abreast of best professional practices and help create conditions for professional growth.
- **Strategic planning.** When schools are required to have school improvement plans for accountability purposes, school leaders pay special attention to monitoring school performance and developing concrete plans for improvement.

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5. Successful school leaders respond productively to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse groups of students.

Many school leaders work with student populations that are increasingly diverse and that may not be experiencing success in school. This includes children who are from low-income families or whose cultural backgrounds or characteristics fall outside of the mainstream (for example, native peoples or recent immigrants, children with physical handicaps, and Latinos or African-Americans). Histories of poor school performance for such students may result from neglect on the part of school and/or district leaders, allocation of the least able teachers and most limited resources to the most needy schools and students, low expectations, or lack of knowledge of effective strategies for working with particular kinds of students in challenging contexts. Evidence suggests that successful leaders of schools in highly diverse contexts focus their efforts on four sets of tasks:

- **Building powerful forms of teaching and learning.** Instructional methods that succeed in many schools may not be effective in all schools. Leaders in highly diverse contexts help identify and implement forms of teaching and learning that are appropriate and effective for the populations they serve. This requires thorough, critical examination of practices that have failed in the past. It also requires careful attention to developing curriculum content that is accessible and engaging, assessment methods (including retention policies) that both monitor performance and motivate students, and features of school and classroom organizational structures, such as class size, student grouping practices, and staffing arrangements, that will ensure ambitious and equitable performance from students.
- **Creating strong communities in school.** A strong sense of affiliation and caring among all students and adults in a school is crucial to engaging and motivating students to learn. This is especially true in school settings where trust and cohesion have been low. School leaders help develop a sense of community in their schools by establishing communal cultures and structures, through strategies such as smaller schools, schools within a school, or personalized learning environments in which children's individual needs are taken seriously.

Students also benefit when teachers and others form a professional learning community. Teacher community enhances teachers' ability to learn how to teach challenging students more effectively, increases their certainty that what they do can make a difference, and increases their commitment to the task. Professional learning communities tend to develop where schools are smaller, there is more time for teacher collaboration, and teachers can make significant decisions about instruction and other matters in the school. Even more important are a climate of openness to innovation, trust and caring among professionals, opportunities for professional development, and supportive leadership.

- **Expanding the proportion of students' social capital valued by the schools.** Students bring knowledge and information, values and preferences, and behavioral habits and dispositions to school. Students have acquired these in part from their relationships and interactions with parents, community members, and other persons in their social network, hence they are sometimes known as forms of "social capital."

Students' social capital becomes an educational asset when it enables them to fit into school life and successfully perform learning tasks. The value of social capital depends in part on what people in the school choose to count as educationally useful. Knowledge and values generated by the linguistic, racial, religious, or cultural diversity of a student's social network may be ignored or discounted when in fact they hold considerable potential for influencing learning.

To succeed with diverse students, teachers and others in schools must choose to view different forms of capital as assets or resources rather than deficits. School leaders play an important role in this process when they help to establish more positive relationships between educators, students, and their families and communities, and when these relationships are built on trust, deep familiarity, and genuine appreciation for the assets of the family or community. School leaders can promote equity and justice for all students by establishing school climates in which patterns of subtle or explicit discrimination are challenged and negated.

- **Nurturing the development of families' educational cultures.** Student learning is enhanced when it is supported by both the school and the family. For that to happen, learning goals must be acceptable to families, and families must have the resources, knowledge, and inclination to help. When families are able to provide academic guidance and support for their children, when they provide time and resources so that children can do their school work, when they can ensure that their children are healthy and ready to learn, and when they have high expectations for their children's learning, they have what can be termed strong "family educational cultures."

School leaders can help strengthen family educational cultures by doing things that promote trust and communication between families and schools, by helping to provide resources to families, by educating and supporting families in matters connected to parenting and schooling, and by adjusting school practices to accommodate to the educational cultures that families do have.

CONCLUSION

Efforts to improve educational leadership should build upon the foundation of well-documented and well-accepted knowledge about leadership that already exists. We know that school leadership is most successful when it is focused on teaching and learning, and that it is necessary but not sufficient for school improvement. We understand that leadership can take different forms in different contexts. We understand some of the mechanisms through which educational leadership has its effects.

There are still many gaps in our knowledge about effective educational leadership. For example, how can educational leaders balance their leadership and managerial responsibilities in ways that move their schools forward? If leadership functions are indeed distributed across many formal and informal roles in a school, how are these roles coordinated and who takes responsibility for what? How can diversity in educational leadership be fostered, so that persons with appropriately rich backgrounds, values, and community connections lead our schools? Do educational leaders need answers to enduring questions about schooling, or are they most in need of provisional answers to immediate local concerns; in either case, how are those answers most likely to be developed and conveyed to potential users of the knowledge?

These and many other questions call out for further inquiry, and for vigorous conversation among the practitioners, policy makers, and scholars who are part of—and who support—the educational leadership profession. ■

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In these times of heightened concern for student learning, school leaders are being held accountable for how well teachers teach and how much students learn. They must respond to complex environments and serve all students well.

The brief, prepared by the Task Force on Developing Research in Educational Leadership of Division A of the American Educational Research Association, presents a summary of well-documented understandings about educational leadership at the school building level. The basics of school leadership focus on setting direction for the school, developing people, and developing the organization. This knowledge can be used with confidence to guide leadership practice, policy, and research. It also can provide a good starting point for dialogue with diverse audiences about the future of educational leadership.

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