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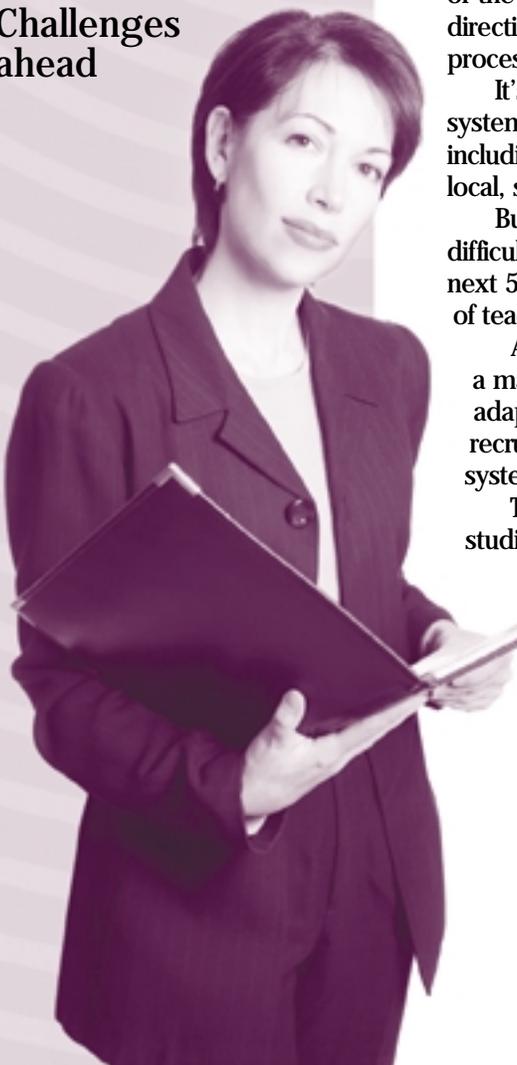
The Progress of Education Reform 2005

District and School Leadership

Vol. 6, No. 2, February 2005

What's inside

- Indirect but powerful impact on learning
- Not just what to do, but how, why and when
- Problems with professional standards
- Challenges ahead



Principals and Superintendents Play Significant – and Frequently Underestimated – Role in Teaching and Learning Process

In education, as in all organizational sectors, the issue of capable leadership – what it looks like, why it matters, and how to develop and sustain it – is a source of widening interest and concern.

For the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, the principal of an inner-city high school or the superintendent of a small rural district, the challenge is the same: to set a clear direction; to galvanize effort around ambitious goals; and to see that the right processes, resources and conditions are in place to help people achieve those goals.

It's a tall order for any executive or manager, and even more so in the education system, where those in charge are saddled with enormous and growing burdens, including insufficient budgets; bureaucratic inertia; political conflicts; and a torrent of local, state and federal mandates.

Burnout and turnover are high, and more schools and districts are finding it difficult to fill leadership positions. The problem is expected to get worse within the next 5-10 years – particularly in urban and rural areas – because of the large number of teachers and administrators approaching retirement age.

At the same time, a growing body of evidence points to leadership capacity as a make-or-break factor for schools and districts under steadily increasing pressure to adapt, innovate and improve. More and more, the lack of a systematic approach to recruiting, developing and retaining talented leaders – at all levels of the education system – is shaping up as a major impediment to large-scale reform.

This edition of *The Progress of Education Reform* summarizes several reports and studies that provide a quick introduction to the issue of school leadership, including:

- How – and the extent to which – the work of principals and superintendents affects student learning and school quality
- The utility and effectiveness of existing professional standards for school leaders
- The emergence of new ideas about the nature, structure and responsibilities of school leadership.

How Leadership Influences Student Learning

(Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota; Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2004, <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/EducationLeadership/HowLeadershipInfluencesStudentLearning.htm>)

The work of principals and superintendents has a powerful, albeit indirect, impact on student learning – second only, among school-related factors, to the quality of curriculum and teaching. And the impact tends to be greatest in schools where the learning needs of students are most acute.

That’s the central finding of this report by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The two organizations have teamed up for what will be the largest and most thorough study to date of the role of leadership in improving student achievement – a five-year, \$3.5 million initiative financed by the Wallace Foundation.

As a first step, the study team reviewed existing research on leadership practice, going back to the “effective schools” studies first carried out in the 1970s. It found considerable evidence that successful leadership can play a significant – and frequently underestimated – role in improving student learning, particularly in schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged children.

“There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. Many other factors may play a role in such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst,” the report said.

For the most part, the report noted, school and district leaders contribute to student learning indirectly, and in three critical areas:

- *Setting directions* – charting a clear course that everyone understands, establishing high expectations, and using data to track progress and performance
- *Developing people* – providing teachers and others in the system with the necessary support and training to succeed
- *Making the organization work* – ensuring the entire range of conditions and incentives in districts and schools fully supports rather than inhibits teaching and learning.

But beyond that, the report said, the knowledge base is troublingly thin. What, for instance, are the essentials of successful school leadership? How do different leadership practices stack up against one another in their relative effects on student performance? How does the effect of certain leadership behaviors vary among urban, suburban and rural schools? And what role do informal leaders – such as teachers, parents and others – play in shaping instruction?

Those and other questions will be the focus of the five-year study, which will involve 180 schools in 45 districts and nine states. Researchers will analyze student-performance data, including state and local test scores, graduation rates and attendance patterns; observe classroom practice; and conduct periodic interviews with teachers, principals and state and district officials.

The project’s goal is to shed new light on how schools should be managed, how administrators should be trained, and what state policies most help principals, superintendents and other education leaders improve teaching and learning.



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Balanced Leadership: What 30 Years of Research Tells Us About the Effect of Leadership on Student Achievement

(Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2003,

http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/LeadershipOrganizationDevelopment/5031RR_BalancedLeadership.pdf)

Effective school leadership involves not just knowing what to do, but also when, how and why to do it. Without that full range of knowledge and abilities – what this report by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) calls “balanced leadership” – even the brightest and most well-intentioned leader isn’t likely to succeed in bringing about real change and improvement.

McREL reviewed three decades of both theoretical and quantitative research on education leadership, including 70 studies that probed the statistical relationship between leadership practices and student achievement. Using meta-analytic techniques, McREL determined that, for an average school, having an effective leader can mean the difference between students’ scoring at the 50th percentile on a given test or achieving a score 10 percentile points higher.

In addition, McREL’s analysis identified 21 specific leadership characteristics significantly correlated with student achievement. The strongest of these was “situational awareness,” defined as the extent to which a leader is savvy about the details and undercurrents in running the school and uses that information to address problems.

The report also says that “just as leaders can have a positive impact on achievement, they also can have a marginal, or worse, a negative impact on achievement.”

What seems to make the difference, the authors conclude, is whether the leader focuses on the right change for that particular school, and whether he or she understands the “order” of that change.

A “first-order” change is consistent with a school’s existing values and practices, and offers obvious benefits to everyone involved. “Second-order” changes, more difficult to produce, call for a break with tradition and practice.

Many people in leadership positions lack the knowledge necessary to lead both first- and second-order change, according to the report. “The literature is replete with examples,” it says, of capable individuals whose leadership initiatives fail because they do not:

- Understand how to balance pushing for change while at the same time protecting aspects of culture, values and norms worth preserving
- Know which policies, practices, processes, resources and incentives to align, and how to align them with organizational priorities
- Know how to gauge the magnitude of change they are calling for and how to tailor their strategies accordingly
- Understand and value the people in the organization, and create an environment that provides them with the support they need to succeed.

The centerpiece of the 19-page report is a “balanced leadership framework” that identifies the specific knowledge, skills, strategies and tools that principals and other school leaders need to positively affect student achievement.



The Leadership We Need: Using Research To Strengthen the Use of Standards for Administrator Preparation and Licensure Programs

(Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2004,
<http://www.mcrel.org/topics/productDetail.asp?productID=184>)

The most widely used set of professional standards for school leaders has several major deficiencies that limit their usefulness in terms of policymaking and program design, according to this follow-up to McREL's *Balanced Leadership* report.

McREL found more than one-quarter of the leadership practices shown to be significantly correlated with student achievement are not reflected in the standards of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). The standards were developed in the mid-1990s under the auspices of the Council of Chief State School Officers, and have since been adopted by 40 states as the basis of their principal-licensing policies.

What's more, the ISLLC standards – 184 separate “indicators” grouped into six categories – don't make clear which leadership responsibilities and practices have been shown to have a greater impact on student learning than others, and thus should be given priority in the design of administrator preparation, licensing and professional development programs, according to McREL.

The report does not recommend abandoning the ISLLC standards, but rather urges they be revised to (1) better reflect the growing body of quantitative research on school-level leadership, and (2) more clearly identify leadership responsibilities and practices most strongly correlated with student achievement.



Growing Tomorrow's School Leaders: The Challenge

(National College for School Leadership, 2003,

http://www.leadspace.govt.nz/leadership/prof_development/research_hartlethomas.php)

What is already a significant problem for many schools and districts – the difficulty of filling key leadership positions – is about to get much worse and more widespread, warns this report by a national leadership research and development center created in 2000 by the British government.

Not just in England, but also in the United States, Canada, Australia and other countries, public- and private-sector organizations alike are faced with an ever-shrinking pool of qualified candidates for executive and general-management positions, the report notes. A variety of trends – from corporate downsizing to the aging of the workforce to an increasingly competitive, increasingly international job market – has given rise to a virtual “war for talent.”

The picture is particularly bleak for the education system, the report says. The number of young people planning a career in teaching is on the decline; a significant percentage of graduates of teacher education programs never enter the profession or leave it within five years; and more than half of the teacher workforce will be eligible for retirement in the next 5-10 years.

To head off what is shaping up as a full-blown crisis, the report says, the education system must follow the lead of forward-thinking organizations – in both the public and private sectors – and make the development of leadership talent a strategic priority.

The report points to the systematic approach to leadership supply and succession that many corporations and other organizations have traditionally relied on. The process involves assessing future leadership needs, identifying a pool of high-potential candidates, and developing those individuals' leadership abilities by giving them the opportunity to advance through a series of “passages”: manage self, manage others, manage managers, manage function and, ultimately, manage organization.

Perhaps the most useful feature of this report is its overview of new thinking about and new approaches to school leadership, which increasingly is seen not as the work of one actor – the principal – but rather as the cumulative activities of a broad set of leaders, both formal and informal, within a school.

The report points to growing recognition that improving student achievement “requires the leadership capability of the many rather than the few,” and that leadership ought to be “located closest to the classroom and distributed throughout the school.”

The report details how these and other approaches might be used to build an “education leadership pipeline” capable of maintaining a steady flow of leaders at all levels of the system, local to national. The aim, it said, is to make sure “the right people are in the right places at the right time to do the right things.”



Other Resources

The MetLife Foundation has awarded ECS a \$350,000 grant to create a toolkit that will identify and promote promising models of school and district leadership.

The toolkit will contain a variety of resources and provide a step-by-step guide for implementing effective leadership practices. ECS will develop the toolkit through site visits to selected states and districts, and through focus groups and interviews with superintendents, principals, teachers, community leaders and students.

ECS will promote and provide technical assistance on the toolkit's use through seminars, teleconferences and Web-based conferences. While the toolkit will be applicable to leaders at all levels within education systems, it will be designed primarily to help state policymakers and district leaders understand and promote promising leadership models designed to improve teaching and learning environments, and increase student achievement.

To learn more about ECS' project work on education leadership, visit www.ecs.org/leadership, where you will find a list of recommended readings, research summaries and links to other sources of information.

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