School Leadership and Student Achievement: Supporting a Framework of Leadership Actions Known To Improve Student Outcomes

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Abstract

School administrators have the second greatest effect on student learning, after classroom instruction. The author’s literature review shows Leithwood et al.’s (2008) framework of leadership actions to be influential in instructional leadership and student success. School leaders are advised to (1) build vision and set direction, (2) develop staff capacity, (3) redesign the school organization to match the vision, and (4) manage the teaching and learning program. This combination of leadership actions improves staff engagement, student engagement, and student achievement.

Recent research agrees that school leadership has a significant effect on student achievement and on school reform as measured by student achievement (Lending & Mrazek, 2014; Webber, Scott, Aitken, Lupart, & Scott, 2013; “Why School Leadership,” 2011). This effect is primarily indirect, as the principal exerts influence on the management of the school organization and the teaching staff (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Given this knowledge at a time when school leaders are challenged by their current role expectations while also expected to lead school and system reform (Fullan, 2008; Marsh, Waniganayake, & De Nobile, 2014), it is increasingly important that instructional leaders efficiently focus their attention on those actions known to improve student learning (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010). A framework of four leadership actions has been proposed and shown to have a significantly positive effect on school reform and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2008; Ward, 2013). School administrators are advised through this framework to (1) build vision and set a direction for their school, (2) develop the capacity of their staff members, (3) redesign the organization to match the vision of the school, and (4) manage the teaching and learning program, as they work with their teaching staff to improve student achievement in the 21st century.

Challenges

Many challenges are associated with the modern principalship. Not least of these is the challenge to stay effective in the position while the demands of the job description grow. A growing educational reform movement, advancing technology, and a changing society create additional significant challenges (Marsh et al., 2014). While constrained by the performance expectations of their job descriptions, principals are also expected to be reform leaders at both the school and systemic levels (Fullan, 2008). Four other specific areas of difficulty have been identified for modern principals: principals are unable to please all stakeholders at all times, and are faced with the task of balancing “the competing and often conflicting demands from various interest groups” (Stewart, 2006, p. 6); principals are required to make difficult decisions on a daily basis; administrators are challenged by the “business of the job” as they function in the role of facility managers; finally, a principal’s leadership defines the effectiveness of his/her school in the eyes of the stakeholders (Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). Competing for attention in this myriad of challenges and distractions is instructional leadership, which is considered to be the primary role of the school principal (Rigby, 2013). Because modern principals face such a varied set of challenges within their job description, an intentional framework of actions is needed to guide school leadership.
While wading through the various challenges connected with a principal’s job description, administrators also find themselves trapped within a system that research has determined is increasingly ineffective and irrelevant. Principals, for example, are required to hold their staff members accountable for their instructional practices, despite the impossibility of possessing the necessary depth of content knowledge to assess every teacher’s knowledge and practices reliably (DuFour & Marzano, 2009). The administrator may not even be the primary educational expert in the school (Stewart, 2006). In fact, research has found that when the focus of the principal was primarily on staff observation and performance evaluations, student achievement decreased; this relationship was thought to be a result of the negative pressure placed on teaching practice (Walker, Lee, & Bryant, 2014). The prevailing model of the principal as an “educational superhero” (“Why School Leadership,” 2011, “Leaders,” para. 4), whereby the leader is the “centre of expertise, power and authority” (Stewart, 2006, p. 7), is considered by current researchers to be inadequate and inappropriate for the needs of the 21st century (DuFour & Marzano, 2009; Marsh et al., 2014; Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). A new and relevant approach to school leadership is needed at a time when society is changing so quickly “that the skills and customs [one learns as a child] are outdated by the time” one reaches the age of 30 (Stewart, 2006, p. 2).

School leadership is considered to be the second greatest effector on student achievement, following direct instruction (Leithwood et al., 2008). In consideration of this knowledge, school leaders and planners have been advised to direct their focus to those leadership practices that are known to improve instruction and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2010). Leaders have been found to improve teaching and learning indirectly, and most powerfully, by influencing “staff motivations, commitments and working conditions” (Leithwood et al., 2008); it is important, therefore, that school leaders adapt their leadership and management practices to affect the performance of their staff in these identified areas. Leithwood et al. (2008) proposed a framework of leadership actions that positively affect staff performance and student achievement in just such a way. This framework can be summarized as performing the following actions: “building vision and setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning program” (Leithwood et al., 2008, pp. 29-30). Given the effect of school leaders on student achievement, principals are advised to develop their schools by using this framework.

**Building Vision and Setting Direction**

In the vision building stage, an effective leader plans to create a new school culture that creates a sustainable “continuity of direction” that the school will continue to travel, even when the present leader is gone (Fullan, 2008, p. 19). The vision of the effective school leader is developed and discussed with all staff members at the beginning of the school year (Ward, 2013), and then explicitly stated for all stakeholders (“Why School Leadership,” 2011). The principal faces two primary tasks when setting a new direction in the school: staff members need to be motivated to accomplish the goals that have been determined for the school, and the skills and attitudes needed for the accomplishment of these goals must be identified and assessed (Leithwood et al., 2008). Developing an educational vision that is shared with all stakeholders and assessing the attitudes of the staff make up the first stage in this leadership framework.

**Developing People**

Given the known relationship between teacher effectiveness and student learning (Fullan, 2008), an important component in developing the capacity of staff members is creating a culture of trust between the school leader and staff members. When this trust is developed, staff members tend to view “their own contribution to the school positively” (Marsh et al., 2014,
This process is initiated when a leader maintains “presence” in the school, whereby presence is defined as “an overarching personal quality possessed by leaders who invest and are skillful in building trusting and supportive relationships, which enhances individual agency” (Marsh et al., 2014, p. 24). “Individual agency” can also be described as “teacher efficacy,” which has been described as the amount of confidence staff members have in their ability to implement initiatives expected to improve learning (Leithwood et al., 2010, p. 676). When staff members have a strong sense of professional efficacy, positive effects have been observed, including increased confidence to implement these school initiatives and taking greater responsibility for student learning, rather than blaming other existing variables (Leithwood et al., 2010; Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). An important component of developing staff, therefore, is growing and nurturing trust between the staff members and the administrator.

Related to the idea of increasing staff efficacy, inevitably leaders will encounter the need to promote change in the attitudes, practices, or behaviours of staff members (Gordon, 2013). Facilitating these types of changes can be accomplished through staff accountability when staff members are valued (and feel valued) by leadership, and are included as members of a team who are working together to accomplish a common purpose (Gale & Bishop, 2014). Staff members who have a high level of professional efficacy and are committed to working together to achieve common goals are then ready to begin taking on more significant leadership roles and working in increasingly collaborative settings. It is vital that leaders promote and develop those attitudes and practices necessary to achieve identified school goals.

Redesigning the Organization

In redesigning the structure of the organization, the primary focus of the school leader should be on developing a collaborative culture that promotes a shared voice, while emphasizing accountability for staff professional growth. Developing this collaborative culture should include emphasis in two areas: shared leadership and professional learning communities (PLCs). Though the principal is the “pivotal figure in promoting the vision” of the school, a school culture is built upon the contributions of a collection of adults all working together on behalf of students (Gale & Bishop, 2014, “Relationship,” para. 6). Therefore, it is important that the leader values shared voice with the school staff, and gives all stakeholders the opportunity for input in school decision making wherever appropriate. Research has demonstrated that when leadership is shared or distributed among staff members, teaching capacity is much stronger than when leadership is maintained solely with the principal (Leithwood et al., 2008). Because distributing leadership and shared voice in a spirit of collaboration among staff members has a positive effect on teaching practices and student learning, these are important actions for principals to take.

In the present educational climate of increased school accountability for student achievement, the principal is obligated to provide staff members with the “time, structure, training, resources and clarity of purpose” needed to succeed in their tasks of maintaining and improving student achievement (DuFour & Marzano, 2009, p. 67). There is a positive connection between school PLCs and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2010), and the effective principal provides time for staff PLCs to meet within the daily or weekly school schedule, promotes the use of PLCs to further the vision of the school, and protects assigned PLC time from the many competing demands for the time of teachers (DuFour & Marzano, 2009; Fullan, 2008; Webber et al., 2013). The significant positive effects of collaboration and a commitment to staff PLCs on improved student learning create an obligation on the school leader to take action in these areas.
Managing the Teaching and Learning Program

There is a relationship between the engagement of teachers in their profession and the engagement of students in their learning (Gordon, 2013). It is, therefore, important that administrators create a positive work environment for teachers, because five out of ten American teachers can be categorized as being disengaged from their work and workplace, wherein disengagement is characterized as follows: performing requested tasks but not exerting any energy beyond what is required, demonstrating negative attitudes toward the workplace, and possessing a compulsion to spread negativity among other staff members (Gordon, 2013). Fortunately, the school leader can exert a strong positive influence on the feelings of a school staff regarding their working conditions: when school leaders attempted to improve teacher working conditions in a systematic and purposeful manner, improvement in both teaching practices and student achievement was observed (Leithwood et al., 2008). Administrators should focus on those variables that are within their capacity to influence. Staff should be protected from “initiative overload,” and be allowed to work with students in an environment as free from distraction as is possible, given the demands of the profession (Leithwood et al., 2010). The principal is advised to assign staff members to the grade level or area of expertise in which they are most likely to be successful, and to provide staff members with the materials and equipment “to do their work right” (Gordon, 2013, p. 14; Ward, 2013, p. 68). When relevant information is shared with staff members in a concise and timely manner, and principal-led meetings are conducted efficiently, student achievement improves (Walker et al., 2014). It is important for school programs and interventions to be assessed as well; where ineffective, these programs should be replaced with others grounded by research, connected to school data, and supportive of teachers’ work (Ward, 2013). Other working conditions should be considered as well, including class sizes, ability groupings within classes, and the amount of instructional time available, all of which affect student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2010). Consideration should be given, therefore, to the working conditions of teachers, as improved working conditions increase staff engagement, student engagement, and student achievement.

Conclusion

School leadership has a significant and positive effect on student achievement, because principals influence the management of the school organization and direct the teaching practices of staff members. Despite many competing challenges, principals have the ability and the resources to effect a positive change in student outcomes, through the practices of the teaching staff, by focusing school efforts on those actions known to improve student achievement results. Leithwood et al.’s (2008) framework of leadership actions positively influences both school reform and student outcomes. By setting a clear vision and direction, developing the staff, redesigning the organization to fit the direction of the school, and positively managing the teaching and learning program, school leaders can expect to see measurable and significant improvements in student achievement.

References


**About the Author**

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