

The Institute for
Education Leadership

AN OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

*on Leadership and
Student Achievement*

For Use With the Leadership Self-Review Tool



Ministry of
Education

Disclaimer

The information and conclusions contained in this report do not necessarily reflect the policies, views, and requirements of the Ontario Ministry of Education.

A new view of effective schools is emerging in the research. Rather than just targeting what individual principals do in schools to be effective, the focus is shifting to what districts must do and what whole systems must do to support student achievement. District vision and accountability focused on student achievement are cited as critical to success. Leadership must be shared across a wide spectrum of stakeholders and system-wide capacity must be addressed to get sustainable results. The role of senior administrators is crucial to making this work.

I used to believe that the school was the primary unit of educational change, and the literature repeatedly insists that it is. However, I'm now persuaded that we can't save education one school at a time. Excellent schools in poor districts implode over time, whereas poor schools in excellent districts get better. (Lambert, 2003, p. 80)

If reform activities are undertaken ... one school at a time, it will be a long time before student achievement reaches "world class standards" in all of the more than 14,000 districts in [the United States]. (Cawelti and Protheroe, 2003, p. 4)

Linda Lambert is professor emeritus at California State University, Hayward. She has worked with thousands of principals, teachers, and district personnel in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia, and Thailand, and has written extensively about leadership in schools. She argues that a high-achieving board will have achieved broad, skilful participation in leadership work at all levels, widely distributed among stakeholders. The district will also have a shared vision and an inquiry-based accountability system in practice at all levels. She describes the

“dual nature of district leadership”, in which the district must create high leadership capacity itself, while simultaneously supporting leadership capacity in its schools (Lambert, 2003, pp. 80–81).

Leithwood et al. (2004) describe how leadership influences student learning, as follows:

Successful education leaders develop their districts and schools as effective organizations that support and sustain the performance of administrators and teachers as well as students ... strengthening district and school cultures, modifying organizational structures and building collaborative processes ... to facilitate the work of organizational members. (p. 7)

School and District Improvement

Important to the discussion of district effectiveness is a discussion of the impact of district actions as a collective, rather than as the sum of the individual actions or characteristics of senior personnel. Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker (1998) note, “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities” (p. xi). They define the six characteristics of professional learning communities as follows:

- shared mission, vision, and values
- collective inquiry
- collaborative teams
- action orientation and experimentation
- continuous improvement
- results orientation

They identify a key role for districts in the school improvement process. It is the district, they say, that must promote and support the six characteristics presented above in all of its schools. They argue:

When a district focuses on helping its educators develop their ability to function as members of a professional learning community, the district will realize the greatest dividends from its investment. The focus on the professional learning community also enables districts to provide a framework for individual school improvement that offers tremendous autonomy to individual schools. (p. 272)

Dufour and Eaker (1990) reference organizational culture as fundamental to successful change. Coleman and Larocque studied 10 school districts in British Columbia, and they link positive student outcomes to a positive district “ethos” (as cited in Maguire, 2003, p. 20). A positive district culture or ethos is seen as the essential context in which professional learning communities can flourish.

Fostering a Culture of Professionalism

Providing direction for the district also includes ... creating a climate that makes possible the achievement of excellence in the system. Much of what the board does to establish a climate for excellence emanates from the tone it sets individually and collectively. By setting fair but rigorous standards of performance, establishing well-considered policies, and treating its own members and others with dignity and respect, the board communicates a professionalism at the top that becomes a model for the entire school system. (Campbell and Greene, 1994, as cited in Land, 2002, p. 37)

Bryk and Schneider (2003), in their study of trust in schools, indicate that:

Each party in a relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role’s obligation and holds some expectations about the obligations of the other parties. For a school community to work well, it must achieve agreement in each role relationship

in terms of the understandings held about these personal obligations and expectations of others... Relational trust is grounded in the social respect that comes from the kinds of social discourse that take place across the school community. Respectful exchanges are marked by genuinely listening to what each person has to say and by taking these views into account in subsequent actions. Even when people disagree, individuals can still feel valued if others respect their opinions. (pp. 21–22)

Fullan (2005) speaks of “high trust districts” which “make the extraordinary possible, energizing people and giving them the wherewithal to be successful under enormously demanding conditions – and the confidence that staying the course will pay off ” (p. 73).

Lambert (2003) says that organizational relationships should involve high district engagement and low bureaucratization. High engagement means frequent interaction and two-way communication, problem solving instead of solution giving, mutual coordination and reciprocal influence, and some shared goals and objectives. Low bureaucratization means an absence of extensive rules and regulations. Communication processes that are open, personal, and reciprocal ensure high engagement (pp. 87–88).

Leadership Training

MacIver and Farley (2003) conducted a review of the role of the central office in improving instruction and student achievement. They argue, “While a degree of school-level autonomy is essential in improving instruction for students, and re-centralization is certainly not the answer, the role of the district central office in positively influencing those factors that raise the quality of classroom instruction cannot be ignored” (p. 29). They indicate that, among the most useful recent research studies, there appears to be a consensus about the importance of the following:

- a district culture emphasizing that achievement is the primary responsibility of every staff member

in the district and that the central office is a support and service organization for the schools

- a primary focus on improving instruction, accompanied by a high level of resources devoted to coherent professional development linked to research-based practices
- focused attention on analysis and alignment of curriculum, instructional practice, and assessment
- professional development for principals and teachers in interpreting data to make good instructional decisions (p. 25)

They suggest asking, to what extent does the district provide:

- mentoring programs for new principals?
- hands-on guidance (including school visits) from central office supervisors?
- professional development in how to be an instructional leader?
- professional development in how to use data to improve instruction?
- relevant student data in a timely fashion?
- relevant budget information in a timely fashion?
- relief from bureaucratic demands that take time away from instructional leadership? (pp. 26–28)

Administrative Structures

Conzemius and O’Neill (2001) talk about the importance of the central administration in supporting and encouraging the change process in schools and in eliminating barriers to innovation. They suggest that many administrative systems actually get in the way of improvements, as school personnel feel that they lose time to bureaucratic paperwork and central-office-mandated procedures. As a result, administrators may find a way to “work around the system” in order to focus on student achievement issues. Paperwork and

reports required by the district may be given lip-service or completed inaccurately, because they are not important to the school; protocols for hiring procedures may be circumvented, with the justification that the principal hired an excellent candidate even if correct hiring procedures were not followed; principals may learn whom to call at the district office to get a job done, instead of joining the queue of other principals waiting for service.

However, Conzemius and O’Neill argue that working around the system leads to inconsistencies, inequities, and, ultimately, the generation of more procedural rules to put a stop to those who are working around the system. They advise that a very important role for central office administrators is to make improvements that will minimize the need for working around the system and simultaneously preserve valuable time for schools to conduct the real business – improving student achievement. They describe the Accelerated Improvement Process (AIP)¹ developed by the Office of Quality Improvement at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as one model for making these types of system improvements in a very short period of time. They cite examples in which large systems used AIP to improve the efficiency of their purchasing process, their process for registration and enrolment of students, and their hiring process, which led to a new availability of resources that the district could then devote to value-added work (pp. 70–71).

Leithwood et al. (2004) stress the importance of leaders “making the organization work – ensuring that the entire range of conditions and incentives in districts and schools fully supports rather than inhibits teaching and learning” (p. 1).

1. AIP involves identifying the problem, holding three intensive improvement marathon meetings, performing the majority of the work between meetings (gathering data, “flowcharting” solutions, analysing potential solutions), and then implementing the chosen solution.

Parent and Community Supports

While there are barriers to successful involvement and while the research is not entirely clear about what works, there is general agreement in the literature that parental involvement in schools is an important component in supporting student success.

Moore and Lasky define the “best practice” for parental involvement as open, responsive, proactive, and inclusionary. The partnership model set out by Epstein et al. (1997) features “overlapping spheres of influence” that involve the family, the school, and the community (as cited in Moore and Lasky, p. 2).

In their research, Moore and Lasky found that the “deficit model”, which keeps parents at a distance, is the norm for parent-school relationships. However, Moore and Lasky say, “Schools that reach out, open their doors, and implement practices of parents’ inclusion are laying the organization groundwork for meaningful parent-teacher partnerships” (p. 3). They also found that schools with strong, emotionally and intellectually supportive professional communities are more likely to embrace innovations in parental involvement (Hargreaves, 1999; Maehr and Midgley, 1996; as cited in Moore and Lasky, 2001, p. 6).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in its paper “Parents as Partners in Schooling” (1997), describes the ideal partnership between school and home as a process in which parents and teachers work together and value what each partner brings to the relationship. In the Education Quality and Accountability Office’s (EQAO’s) *Ontario Report and Guide on School Improvement Planning* (2000), the essence of the ideal partnership message is captured as follows:

Shared responsibility and shared decision making are the cornerstone of successful improvement planning. As staff work with parents to review the results of local and provincial assessments and

create action plans, they develop a sense of shared responsibility and determination to bring about the changes that are required. (EQAO, 2000, as cited in Moore and Lasky, 2001, p. 7)

Succession Planning, Recruitment, and Retention of Effective Leaders

Hargreaves et al. (2003) looked at the issue of succession planning for principals in Ontario secondary schools. They claim that succession planning ought to involve deliberate, systemic, and sustainable efforts to project leadership requirements, identification of a pool of high-potential candidates, development of leadership competencies in those candidates through intentional learning experiences, and then selection of leaders from among the pool of potential leaders.

The report presents the following recommendations for the principal succession process, among others:

- Make principal succession a thoughtfully planned and ethically managed process. Greater transparency and less secrecy should be evident in the plan. Authentic consultation is necessary.
- Give more attention to outbound knowledge and to distributed leadership, so that successive leaders can be groomed and ready for takeover. Inspirational leaders who share investment in change and distribute it widely support succession principles better than charismatic leaders who leave an unfillable void.
- Develop deeper pools of talent, using early identification strategies, better mentorship, and peer leadership networks. (pp. 82–84)

References

- Bryk, A., and Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. A volume in the American Sociological Association's Rose Series in Sociology. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Cawelti, G., and Protheroe, N. (2003). *Supporting School Improvement: Lessons From Districts Successfully Meeting the Challenge*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.
- Conzemius, A., and O'Neill, J. (2001). *Building Shared Responsibility for Student Learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Dufour, R., and Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Hargreaves, A., Moore, S., Fink, D., Brayman, C., and White, R. (2003). *Succeeding Leaders? A Study of Principal Succession and Sustainability*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.
- Lambert, L. (2003). *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Land, D. (2002). *Local School Boards Under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Students' Academic Achievement*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk. Retrieved from the website of the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), <http://www.eric.ed.gov>, on September 30, 2004.
- Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., and Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *Executive Summary: How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. Published by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota, and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.
- MacIver, M., and Farley, E. (2003). *Bringing the District Back In: The Role of the Central Office in Improving Instruction and Student Achievement*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk. Retrieved from the ERIC website, <http://www.eric.ed.gov>, on September 30, 2004.
- Maguire, P. (2003). *District Practices and Student Achievement: Lessons from Alberta*. Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education. Retrieved from the Society's website, <http://www.saeec.ca>, on October 29, 2004.
- Moore, S., and Lasky, S. (2001). *Parent Involvement in Education*. EQAO Research Series No.6. Retrieved from the website of the Education Quality and Accountability Office, <http://www.eqao.com>, on April 20, 2005.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (1997). "Parents as Partners in Schooling." Abstract. Retrieved from the Organisation's website, <http://www.oecd.org>, on April 20, 2005.