



## Principals' Recommendations for Reform Leadership

by

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As standards-based reform has directed attention to schools as the unit of organizational accountability with the most influence on teaching and learning, principals have become the education leaders most responsible for managing learning conditions. The movement to reform and improve schools demands that principals be visionaries focused on improving teaching and learning to ensure their students' success; they must be leaders capable of promoting their vision throughout the school community and knowledgeable of the specific practices that will bring it to reality. However, principals report little in their preparation or ongoing professional development to equip them for their multifaceted leadership role (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000).

To address this need for better guidance and support for principals as leaders, the Distinguished Principal Fellows Program\* was created in 2000 at the Laboratory for Student Success, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, at Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education. The invited Distinguished Principal Fellows lead schools representative of the diversity of American education, including elementary, middle, urban, and rural schools. In 2001, following the recommendations of the first cohort in 2000, the second group of Distinguished Principal Fellows convened in Philadelphia to design a professional development program

for their peers. They sought to answer the following question: "What do principals need to know about instruction and learning, and what must they be able to do to transform their schools into high-performing learning communities?" This *Spotlight* provides an overview of the principals' research-based recommendations that formed the basis of that development program—recommendations for successful leadership that will enable all schools to become high-performing learning communities.

### School Re-culturing

Schools committed to improvement must re-culture by creating an environment receptive to new operating procedures and new ways of thinking. New systems of teamwork, communication, and collaboration must be established. Employees must develop continuous improvement skills. Principals must create a common culture of professional values, mutual interdependence, and high expectations for student learning based on methods for exercising differential treatment of teachers with regard to the school's level of progress in reform. They must replicate desired classroom practices in administrative actions and in collegial interactions. Principals must talk about practice in a nonthreatening, critical, and supportive way. In addition, they must help their staff to internalize the expectations of standards-based instruction, develop positive professional face-to-face

relationships, and facilitate collaboration. They must develop collective accountability for the quality of their own and their colleagues' instructional practice and the level of student performance. It is the principal's responsibility to foster agreement among teachers, parents, and students about school goals and how to achieve them.

### Distributed Leadership

The theory and practice of distributed leadership as shaped by Richard Elmore (2000) suggest this type of leadership collaboration can provide the guidance and direction needed to lead in today's schools. Distributed leadership recognizes that people typically specialize or develop particular competencies that are related to their interests, aptitudes, prior knowledge, skills, and specialized roles. Additionally, competency varies considerably among people in similar roles; some professionals are simply better at doing some things than others. Partnering these persons in a complementary manner brings new capabilities and efficiency to an organization. According to Elmore (2000, p. 14–15), "In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership among roles in the organization, and without working hard at creating a common culture, or set of values."

Adopting the premise of Elmore's work,

the Distinguished Principal Fellows who convened in 2001 designed a model of leadership that would enhance school leadership capacity. Distributed leadership, according to the Fellows, should entail (a) the principal's dissemination of decision making, supervisory roles, and other duties to able stakeholders in the school community, and (b) collaboration with peers outside the school for guidance. The Distinguished Principal Fellows determined that the application of this leadership model to the principalship would improve schools by connecting principals with new ideas and each other in a consultative, mentoring network.

Distributing leadership within the school community to local school councils—including parents, students, and other external stakeholders—assistant principals, counselors, curriculum specialists, teachers, and teacher teams develops ownership and responsibility and appears to increase the effectiveness of the work. This kind of leadership, often informal, is not within the purview of one individual, but rather a collective leadership. Schools successful at implementing new curricula, for example, have been found to have a variety of individuals—principals, teachers, office staff, and external advisors—performing overlapping roles (Heller & Firestone, 1995), bringing their complementary skills and knowledge to the work.

Distributed leadership in schools also suggests that principals consult peers for support and coaching in successful school practices. New principals need the consistent support of knowledgeable mentors to shape instructional practice and exercise visionary school-community leadership. New and experienced principals often need assistance in dealing with new structures critical for contemporary school leadership, including data-driven decision-making that transforms low-performing schools into high-performing communities; aligning standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment; building school leadership team capacity; and connecting schools, families, and the community (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000).

Strategies such as in-district principal peer groups, monthly support sessions, and retreats are forums for review and assistance in development and implementation of school improvement plans. Cross-district cohorts and regional networks offer similar opportunities for growth and allow for inter-district and school visitations so that principals can gain a broader understanding of promising practices in school leadership.

### **Instructional Improvement**

The Distinguished Principal Fellows recognize that instructional improvement is necessary for creating high-performing learning communities. The Fellows assert that in order to achieve effective instruction, principals must:

- understand that teaching requires a body of skills and knowledge that can be developed.
- institute a systemic change in teaching and learning *sustained over time*.
- know how to create an environment of *collective learning* in which teachers' knowledge and skills are continually enhanced for improved student learning.
- model skills and engage teachers in analysis and collective understanding of effective educational practices.
- establish effective modes of shared monitoring of curriculum and instruction.
- establish and moderate settings for teachers to address ongoing acquisition of new content and instructional skills with opportunities for practicing valued behaviors within the school organizational setting.

### **Conclusion**

Standards-based reform has placed new and broadened demands on principals. Education has changed so dramatically in recent decades that a redefinition of the knowledge and skills needed for effective school leadership has occurred. Today's principals must be instructional leaders who are knowledgeable of best practices for teaching and learning and can work to ensure that these practices are evident in their classrooms and the school culture.

The preservice preparation and inservice experiences of most principals have not prepared them to lead in this new paradigm. Current professional development programs have also failed to strengthen principals' procedural knowledge and understanding of instructional leadership and how to share leadership in their schools for true reform. The Distinguished Principal Fellows Program participants have identified components of leadership that will implement and sustain reform in schools and meet the needs of new and tenured colleagues who seek educational reform. In accordance with the recommendations of the Distinguished Principal Fellows Program, the Laboratory for Student Success has established an annual National Principal Leadership Conference and Regional Principal Leadership Forums that address task-specific skills that not only help principals re-culture their schools, distribute leadership, and improve instruction through collective learning, but also maintain these fundamental principles of improved instruction and management. Widespread implementation of this professional development design is essential to creating and retaining visionary principals.

### **References**

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- Heller, M. F., & Firestone, W. A. (1995). Who's in charge here? Sources of leadership for change. *Elementary School Journal*, 96, 65–86.

\*The Distinguished Principal Fellows Program was initiated by the late Margaret C. Wang, Founder and Director of the Center for Research in Human Development and Education and Executive Director of the Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University, to identify outstanding principals committed to building capacity as instructional leaders.