McREL POLICY brief

November 2004

Creating Conditions for Leadership Effectiveness: The District's Role

by Kirsten Miller

Research increasingly points to the relationship between effective leadership and increased student achievement. But just what constitutes effective leadership — and how to best support school leaders — has been a matter of both study and speculation. This policy brief draws on McREL's leadership research and an analysis of the needs in McREL's Central Region service area to provide suggestions for districts on ways to support principals and other school leaders in realizing the goal of enhanced learning for all students.

Framing the Issue

On August 16 and 17, 2004, state education chiefs, state legislators, governors' policy advisors, higher education officials, association officials, and superintendents and principals from McREL's Central Region service area gathered in Denver for McREL's Annual Policy Forum, "School Leadership that Works: Creating Conditions for Success through Policy." Participants met to develop plans for effecting positive changes to school leadership in their states. During the event, Richard Laine, director of education for the Wallace Foundation, discussed the often-cited shortage of certified principals willing to step into leadership positions. Drawing on findings from three research projects commissioned by the Foundation, Laine noted that this "shortage" may not actually be a shortage per se. Instead, as noted in the Wallace Foundation's (2003) report *Beyond the Pipeline: Getting the Principals We Need, Where They Are Needed Most*, "Many credentialed or would-be candidates, both inside and outside the education field, either are not seeking jobs in the districts or schools that most need them — or are shunning leadership positions altogether" (p. 8).

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The problems related to attracting and retaining qualified administrators, Laine noted, are problems related to difficult working conditions, a lack of incentives, and an unmanageable

range of responsibilities. Many principals, for example, are expected to supervise cafeteria staff, coordinate bus schedules, attend athletic events, develop and maintain effective parent- and community-school relationships, complete numerous mandated state and federal reports, and act as instructional leaders.

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Leading schools in ways that ensure that all students learn the knowledge and skills they need at each stage of education is a vitally important task. Now more than ever, it is important for districts to implement policies and practices to support principals in this work. Before local policymakers institute such policies and practices, however, a review of the research on effective leadership is critical.

What Does Effective Leadership Look Like?

In 2001, McREL began an extensive review of more than 5,000 studies conducted over a 30-year period that purported to examine the relationship between school leadership and student achievement. Seventy of these studies met McREL's criteria for inclusion in a meta-analysis. The sample in this analysis involved 2,894 schools, approximately 14,000 teachers, and 1.1 million students — one of the largest-ever samples for an examination of research on leadership practices.

McREL's meta-analysis (see Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003) resulted in the identification of 21 leadership responsibilities and 66 associated practices that are correlated with student achievement. A key finding that emerged is that principal leadership is significantly correlated with student achievement. The average effect size, expressed as a correlation, is .25. This means that a one standard deviation improvement in principal leadership translates into a 10 percentile-point gain in student achievement on a norm-referenced test. The authors explain this correlation as follows:

> ....Consider two schools (school A & school B) with similar student and teacher populations. Both demonstrate achievement on a standardized, norm-referenced test at the 50th percentile. Principals in both schools are also average — that is, their abilities in the 21 key leadership responsibilities are ranked at the 50th percentile. Now assume that the principal of school B improves her demonstrated abilities in all 21 responsibilities by exactly one standard deviation.
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> Our research findings indicated that this increase in leadership ability would translate into mean student achievement at school B that is 10 percentile points higher than school A. Expressed differently, a one standard deviation improvement in leadership practices is associated with an increase in average student achievement from the 50th percentile to the 60th percentile. (Waters et al., p. 3)

How Do We Develop Strong Leaders?

As the effects of good leadership on student achievement become more evident, the question becomes: How can districts best support principals in raising student achievement?

Improve Principal Preparation Programs

Quantitative and qualitative evidence support the notion that many principals are not adequately trained to cope with the demands of the position. In their study of the principalship, for example, Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundlach (2003) report that "principals generally characterized traditional principal preparation as middle management training which did not include substantive mentorship" (p. 38). A majority of the principals surveyed for the report noted that most of the skills they needed to effectively run their schools were learned "on the job." Complicating matters is the fact that a spate of new federal and state accountability mandates has fundamentally changed the job. No longer are principals simply responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the school. Now they also must be school improvement experts who are able to motivate staff to make any necessary changes.

In some states, principal preparation programs have not been revised to reflect these changes. McREL recommends that districts review their principal preparation policies to ensure that they effectively prepare principals to be instructional leaders — leaders who have the skills and knowledge set that is correlated with increased student achievement. Districts might consider tracking the performance of principals who graduate from specific preparation programs, and gauging their success over time. As part of this process, districts should review program designs to determine if they include research-based leadership practices correlated to school improvement and student achievement. Though factors other than preparation also are likely to impact a principal's success, compiling data on the components and effectiveness of specific programs can help districts tailor their preparation policies and programs to be most effective.

The McREL Fellows Program

This program provides school leaders with a series of knowledge and skills-building workshops based on McREL's Balanced Leadership research. Over the course of a year, participants build their knowledge of effective leadership and school improvement efforts and develop their leadership skills through seven days of professional development (provided as two, 2-day sessions and one 3-day session). Participants also receive ongoing, online support through a tailored website and access to resources designed to help leaders improve student achievement in their schools. For more information, link to www.mcrel.org or call 303.337.0990.

Support Novice Principals

As important as initial preparation is, however, ensuring that principals are equipped for the demands of the job goes further. Principals also need support as they enter into their leadership roles. Though principals must be accountable to districts for their performance, districts too must be accountable to their principals; in other words, they must determine what tools and supports their principals need to be effective and find ways to provide principals with those supports.

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A number of state education departments and professional organizations (e.g., administrator associations) have begun to sponsor principal mentoring programs, in which new principals are paired with veteran principals for guidance and support. Features of effective mentoring programs, as described in *Making the Case for Principal Mentoring* (The Education Alliance at Brown University & National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2003), include organizational support, clearly defined outcomes, screening and training of both mentors and protégés, and a learner-centered focus. Studies suggest that implementing mentoring or peer coaching programs can reduce professional isolation, boost collegiality, and encourage reflective thinking (see, e.g., Speck & Krovetz, 1996). By pairing new principals with veterans, districts are likely to mitigate some of the stresses that beginning principals face — which in turn may help reduce turnover.

Districts also might tap into resources available from professional organizations. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), for instance, recently instituted a member principal "help line" on its website (www.naesp.org). Association members can post questions about a variety of topics related to the principalship, which are answered by a cadre of veteran principals who have been trained to staff the help line. Inquiring principals promptly receive a response to their questions, generally within 24 hours. In the alternative, districts might use resources such as this as a model for developing a local, collegial network of their own. These professional groups could provide additional support and much-needed collegiality, particularly in instances where formal mentorship programs might not be practical — for example, in smaller districts or districts with vast geographical distances between schools.

Free Up Principals to Focus on Academic Achievement

It isn't only new principals who may benefit from increased support at the district level, however. Veteran principals may be adept at the juggling act of the principalship, but likely still consider it difficult to find time for each of the many responsibilities they face each school day. A number of districts are addressing this issue by actively re-orienting the principalship toward what matters

most. In Talbot County, Maryland, for example, the district has hired "school managers" to handle some management tasks that previously fell to principals. Now principals in the district are free to focus on tasks such as instruction and professional development.

As districts consider such options, it is important to note that some management tasks are in fact correlated to student achievement. For example, one of the 66 responsibilities that are part of McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework™ is "Order." This responsibility is defined as "the extent to which the principal establishes a set of standard operating principles and routines" (Waters & Grubb, 2004, p. 11). The practices associated with this responsibility include providing and enforcing clear structures, rules, and procedures for both students and teachers, and establishing routines for the running of the school that teachers and staff understand and follow. Given its correlation to student achievement, this management task should remain in the hands of a principal. Other management tasks, however, such as ensuring compliance with school finance laws, could be handed over to a school manager.

Additional Resource: Institute of Educational Leadership (IEL)

IEL's mission is "to improve education—and the lives of children and their families—through positive and visionary change." To this end, IEL offers an array of programs, publications, and other resources aimed at empowering school leaders. Among these resources is e-Lead, a website developed by IEL in partnership with the Laboratory for Student Success. E-Lead provides, at no cost to its users, a programs database, leadership library, and professional development programming. www.iel.org

Set District Priorities in View of Research

In McREL's work with school districts, the district's role has emerged as a key issue in shaping the conditions under which principals can do their most productive work. Districts must set their priorities in view of what research has shown to be effective. As part of that process, districts should review the research on effective leadership, and determine whether their principals have the authority and supports necessary to implement the leadership practices that have been identified as effective.

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For example, one of the leadership responsibilities identified in McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework is "Focus," which is defined as "the extent to which the principal establishes clear goals and keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention" (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004, p. 8). Practices associated with this responsibility include establishing

high, concrete goals and expectations for students, curricula, instruction, assessment, and the general functioning of the school — and keeping everyone's attention focused on these goals. Marzano (2003) has documented the importance of establishing a "guaranteed and viable curriculum"; indeed, he identifies it as the most important school-level factor in increasing student achievement. Principals need district support to attend to this vital task effectively; aligning a curriculum to state standards, for example, is a tremendously time-consuming and detailed process. Requiring each school in a district to undertake this process may be unrealistic. Therefore, whereas the scope, sequencing, and pacing of the curriculum should be district based, the implementation of that curriculum is entirely a school-level focus.

Guidance for Districts: Key Points

- Review principal preparation policies to ensure that they effectively prepare principals to be instructional leaders.
- Support novice principals, through mentoring and other programs.
- Free up principals to focus on academic achievement.
- Set district priorities in view of research.

Another example of an area in which districts may need to provide further support to principals relates to the responsibility that McREL calls "Monitors/evaluates," which is defined as "the extent to which the principal monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on students' learning" (Waters & Grubb, 2004, p. 10). The practices associated with this responsibility include monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the school's curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This is another instance in which principals cannot effectively attend to this responsibility without appropriate supports from the district. The district's role, in this instance, is to create an infrastructure that allows principals access to the data they need to effectively monitor and evaluate curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Conclusion

If principals are to create the conditions that lead to improved student learning, districts must consider the research on school and leadership practices that are correlated to student achievement. By finding ways to support their principals — by aligning training to job responsibilities, by providing support and freeing up principals to attend to important leadership practices, by making clear and logical distinctions between the responsibilities of the district and the job of the principal, and by ensuring that principals have the resources necessary to get their jobs done — districts will be well on their way to helping principals focus on their most pressing task: helping all students reach high standards.

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This publication has been funded at least in part with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-01-CO-0006. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of the U.S. Government.

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