

Washington School Research Center



# Lessons on Leadership:

A Study of Distributed Leadership in  
Washington State

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**The Washington School Research Center (WSRC)** is an independent research and data analysis center within Seattle Pacific University. The Center began in July 2000, funded through a gift from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Our mission is to conduct sound and objective research on student learning in the public schools, and to make the research findings available for educators, policy makers, and the general public for use in the improvement of schools. We believe that sound data and appropriate data analysis are vital components for the identification of school and classroom practices related to increased student academic achievement.

Washington School Research Center  
3307 Third Avenue West, Suite 318  
Seattle, WA 98119  
Phone: 206-378-5379  
Fax: 206-286-7393  
Web: [www.spu.edu/wsrc](http://www.spu.edu/wsrc)

**Martin L. Abbott, Ph.D.**  
Executive Director  
Professor of Sociology

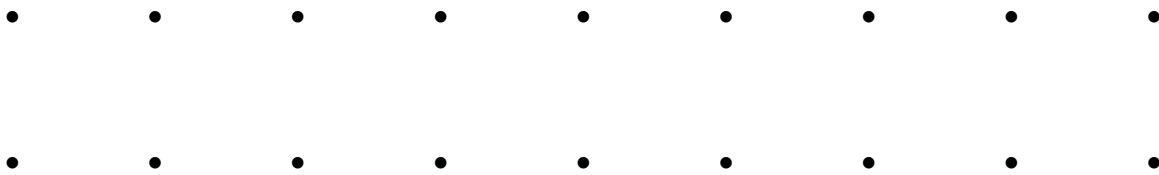
**Duane B. Baker, Ed.D.**  
Director of Research

**Karen C. Smith, Ed.D.**  
Research Analyst

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A Research Report From  
The Washington School Research Center



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## Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Characteristics of Effective Districts</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Characteristics of Leaders</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Characteristics of Leaders by Role</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>IMPLICATIONS</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>19</b>





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## INTRODUCTION

As traditionally structured, American schools, in general, have found it more difficult to educate some students than others. In Washington State, as in most other states, the single best predictor of student achievement at the school level is the percentage of students on free or reduced (f/r) lunch status (Abbott & Joireman, 2001). This fact has made comparing school-wide performance problematic, let alone comparing district-wide performance. Therefore, it has been difficult to identify the schools and districts that are most successful at helping their students reach high standards because the comparative success and progress of student achievement must be considered in light of the demographic challenges facing the school and the district.

Over the life of educational reform in Washington State, schools and districts have experienced various levels of success in raising student achievement as measured by the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). For the last seven years, the Washington School Research Center (WSRC) has been interested in studying schools and districts in the state that are distinguished by their remarkable progress, despite their challenging demographics, as measured by the WASL. Although it was clear that some schools were experiencing high levels of success (WSRC, 2002), an important consideration for those invested in school reform is the degree to which *widespread* success is possible. This question led us to conduct our study on effective districts in Washington State (WSRC, 2004). When we began our effective districts study, there was general agreement that highly effective teachers were present in some schools and that highly effective schools were present in some districts.

The question remained, however, as to whether or not there existed highly effective districts in the state. The *From Compliance to Commitment* report focused on 10 successful districts in Washington State and described many of the characteristics these districts had in common. We did not, however, go into depth on how they developed those characteristics or on the nature of the leadership that helped bring about the changes in those districts.

In this study, *Lessons on Leadership*, we build upon our previous report on effective districts and examine the types of leadership provided in the 10 districts that have been successful at meeting Washington’s learning standards despite their demographic challenges. Our purpose is to add to the growing body of research that identifies *distributed leadership* as an important characteristic of effective districts.

Beginning with an assumption that superintendents were important leaders in these effective districts, we originally designed our study to identify the characteristics of “effective” superintendents. Early in the evaluation design process, however, it became clear that the superintendent was a necessary but not sufficient contributor to district success. Upon reviewing our field notes and reports from several previous studies (WSRC 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004), we discovered a trend toward what we continued to refer to as *distributed leadership*, although it was described differently from school to school and from district to district. Because distributed leadership was a reoccurring theme in many of our previous studies, the focus of this report is to provide greater insight into the characteristics of distributed leadership in 10 effective districts in Washington State. Thus, we returned to those districts highlighted in our previous report on effective districts, *From Compliance to Commitment* (WSRC, 2004).

The 10 districts that participated in our two district studies are listed below. For more details on the original study, the process of selecting these districts, and the study methodology, please see *From Compliance to Commitment* (WSRC, 2004). Although not selected on this basis, the districts represent an equitable distribution of Eastern and Western Washington locations; rural, suburban, and urban settings; and large, medium, and small districts.

- Bellingham Public Schools
- Central Valley School District
- Federal Way School District
- Lynden School District
- Medical Lake School District
- Nooksack Valley School District
- Spokane Public Schools
- Tumwater School District
- West Valley School District (Spokane)
- West Valley School District (Yakima)

## FINDINGS

Because the findings focus on lessons learned on leadership in these 10 districts, we have chosen to begin by framing our findings within the context of the *characteristics of effective districts* found in the previous report. We then expand the discussion by providing findings related to *characteristics of leaders in these effective districts*. Finally, we explore the various *roles individuals and groups play* in providing leadership in effective districts.

As a follow-up study, we asked participants to respond to questions regarding the nature of the leadership provided in their districts and the impact of that leadership on their effectiveness as a district. Our primary question was, “How would you describe leadership in your district?” Follow-up questions and prompts included:

- What strategies are you using to develop leaders within the district?
- How would you describe your leadership style?
- What does distributed leadership mean to you?
- What leadership roles are the board, central office, building administrators, union officials, and teachers playing?
- How would the district look different if there was not strong leadership?

Responses reflected the complexity of leadership in an educational setting and highlighted the difficulty of balancing local priorities, community characteristics, district structures, and interpersonal dynamics unique to these settings. Our analyses confirmed important patterns and themes regarding the *characteristics of effective districts* (as previously reported):

- Commitment to school reform
- Ownership for student learning
- Distributed leadership
- Collaborative organizational environment
- Focus on adult learning
- Trust and relationship-building

Additionally, our analyses uncovered similarities in educators’ perceptions of the *characteristics of leaders in effective districts* including:

- Communicating effectively
- Modeling before mandating
- Empowering others to lead
- Providing support

Finally, we gained insight into the degree to which certain characteristics are perceived to be present in leaders *based on roles*: superintendents and central office administrators, school board members, building principals, teachers, and teacher association/union representatives. Although these characteristics were not manifested equally across districts, they did emerge repeatedly during interviews and provide important information about characteristics of effectiveness relative to roles.

## Characteristics of Effective Districts

### Commitment to School Reform

Among the leaders in these 10 districts, there continued to be a clear understanding of the tenets of school reform and a commitment to them. As before, we found the primary focus of their reform work was on student learning. A teacher summarized this focus, stating, “Conversations are always about student learning, because that’s the most important thing.” Effective districts recognized the responsibility of leadership in accepting, guiding, and sustaining a change agenda, and in most cases district leaders were deliberate and at the forefront in assuming that responsibility. Another teacher reported, “The principal introduces it, the lead teachers buy into it, and the others follow.” A superintendent added, “I don’t think our board and principals would put up with a superintendent who didn’t push the reform movement.”

Effective districts also recognized the responsibility of leadership to ensure that school reforms were sustainable. One superintendent said, “The Board has been supportive of the reform movement. The board is pushing and wanting to see the schools move forward and make progress.” The need to continually “push” was clear to school board members as well. For example, one board member stated, “At the building level, they probably would not be doing a lot of the things they are doing to improve learning if it hadn’t been shared with them and pushed by the district office.”

### Ownership of Student Learning

Leaders in these districts recognized the challenge of generating ownership for learning among everyone in their districts and repeatedly described it as “changing the culture.” For these leaders, successfully reforming schools demanded that everyone in the organization take responsibility for ensuring that *all students* achieved at high levels. Although achieving such commitment is not easy, it was an essential aspect of the reform movement, according to interview data.

Leaders in these districts recognized their responsibility for guiding and supporting school reform, but they were also intentional in creating ownership throughout the district for the success of all students. One district office administrator commented, “You really see people grappling with *ALL* children – fundamentally as an organization we believe that. At the highest levels people are grappling with *ALL* children.” One principal commented, “How can we help bring every student up to the level s/he is capable of reaching? It is not just looking at how we can get every student to pass the WASL. Test scores are a reflection of learning.” Another principal noted that for school leaders, “It’s about *ALL* kids; we want every single kid to be successful. It’s not just a job . . .”

## **Distributed Leadership**

Many study participants indicated that their success was due in large part to the degree to which the central office expected, encouraged, and supported a model of shared leadership. Although central office administrators thought they were responsible for creating a strategic plan, mission, and vision and for creating awareness and support for a reform agenda, they also acknowledged the benefits of including more voices in the work. As one superintendent observed of his district, "People are very democratic here. This should be modeled at all levels. It's a value." A principal pointed out that in his district, "There is no reason why anyone can't be a member of the leadership in this district. There's no top down, we're all part of the system. Teachers are asking teachers. Leadership is learning how to learn with your staff."

An important consideration in sharing responsibility, according to these educators, is that their leaders are more than "just managers." They possess particular skills that encourage collaboration and innovation, and they are comfortable with site-based decision-making. According to interview data, educators in these districts expected this type of leadership, and they found that direction for such autonomous and visionary leadership often came from the district. As one central office administrator said, "You have to be able to allow the principal to tell his/her teachers and community that this is what the district is doing and where we are going." A building-level leader acknowledged this responsibility in stating, "We have a lot of say in where the district is going; it's not top down. If we make a decision, we live with it."

## **Collaborative Organizational Environment**

Leaders in these effective districts spoke enthusiastically about the value of teamwork, partnerships, collaborative time, and efforts to creatively and collaboratively solve problems. Several district leaders also discussed their successes in structuring K-12 interactions and reducing isolationism. Together, these strategies and structures produced collaborative organizational environments. Educators described this tendency toward collaboration as creating "non-intimidating" and "family-like" work environments. One district leader talked about how the school board and the union were "partnering," while teachers in another district observed, "The team is more powerful than an individual. We all feel like we are in this together." Additionally, one union leader credited the collaborative spirit for a rise in student achievement: "One of the reasons our scores are so high is because we have set aside time to work on things together. We focus on collaboration."

Developing an organizational culture that embraces collaboration demands that staff use time efficiently. Many of these districts reported that they design their meeting schedules and committee structures to do the work of school reform. As an example, one superintendent stated, "We have worked on countless matters that are very, very difficult. I think that commitment to try to solve problems together is not perfect, but it is a commitment." In another district, the superintendent talked about moving from a confrontational approach to a collaborative approach with their teachers' association. The Superintendent stated that they hold monthly meetings where "problems are dealt with. We talk through concerns. An awful lot of stuff gets taken care of there. I think your relationship with the union is a critical component to school improvement."

### **Focus on Adult Learning**

An essential component of education reform in the study districts is the emphasis and support given to professional development and adult learning. Every leadership group – superintendents, central office administrators, principals, teacher leaders, and association representatives – conceded the importance of continuous learning and capacity building. A district superintendent reported, “Significant attention is given to creating capacity among building administrators.” The result is an expectation that all staff (and students) contribute. The superintendent went on to say that this type of leadership is modeled at all levels, horizontally and vertically.

The importance of designing professional development around school reform issues in the context of adult learning, capacity-building, and district needs was illustrated to some degree by the professional growth programs and opportunities they supported. Many of these districts preferred to lead within-district professional development programs utilizing their own personnel and expertise. This was particularly true in the areas of curriculum development, instructional strategies, and assessment training.

### **Relational Trust**

Leaders accepted that an important element of their work was to establish and nurture a trusting and respectful culture. Such a culture, they observed, encouraged personal relationships and open communication. These educators credited district leadership for promoting such relationships and for encouraging open lines of communication at all levels of the organization. According to one respondent, the district’s inclination toward relational trust “flows through leadership outward.”

Interviewees offered their expertise on ways to create trusting, respectful, and safe working environments, suggesting strongly that leaders listen and establish communication guidelines. One of the most important elements of relational trust, according to these educators, was the degree to which people felt safe within their environment to share their views and take risks. In the majority of the districts, teachers said that district administrators cultivated positive relationships based on mutual respect, an important step in encouraging open communication. A teachers’ association leader pointed out a risk of working in an insecure and non-trusting environment: “Personal relationships are pretty critical. As a union, we could make school improvement very difficult.”

### **Characteristics of Leaders in Effective Districts**

Our previous study identified characteristics common among effective districts. The present study uncovered characteristics that were common to the leaders in these districts. The most prominent of these characteristics were: (1) an ability to communicate effectively, (2) a tendency to lead by example before mandating desired changes, (3) a skill for empowering others to lead, and (4) a capacity for providing support.

## Communicating Effectively

In all of the participating districts, leaders, and particularly the superintendents and district office administrators, described themselves as the chief messengers in communicating instructional mission, goals, and objectives for student knowledge and skill development. Leaders also explained their steps for implementing a reform agenda. One of the superintendents stated, “We focus on communication from the school up and the district down.” Teachers in another district said of their superintendent, “[The superintendent’s] biggest asset is always providing information. [The superintendent] keeps us informed... writes us weekly letters... doesn’t berate anybody, but has a great way of telling you that you need to change.”

**Ineffective communication.** There was a perception among the educators that when problems arise in a district, it is often a matter of miscommunication or lack of communication. One district administrator recognized this and described “a lack of shared vision – some disconnects. As we grow and change, we assume too much and the communication breaks down. The need to communicate goals, vision, and plans needs to be communicated all the time.”

**Effective communication.** Effective communication took many forms, according to these school leaders, who defined it as “two-way,” “back and forth,” “up and down,” “formal,” “informal,” and “for the community.” Said one principal, “We have professional discussions about how to improve the whole system.” A union representative stated, “There is a lot of communication and cohesiveness between the district office and the school level that filters down through the teachers.”

**Open communication.** The importance of open communication was clear as well. Honesty, clarity, and full-disclosure were viewed as key elements of good communication and of effective leadership. A superintendent said, “I tell people that I need to know the good, the bad, and the ugly, or I can’t come up with any way to solve it.” Union leaders in one district described their superintendent as someone who “wants input.” [The superintendent] asks lots of questions and always values your opinion and presents the data to you. We discuss it. Everything is pretty upfront.” Many of those interviewed suggested that their supervisor requests and accepts input and feedback and values a diversity of opinions. Leaders also demonstrated a commitment to dialogue, according to respondents from many of the districts. “Even when things are difficult, we try to maintain a commitment to dialogue,” remarked one interviewee.

**Willing to listen.** Educators appreciated knowing that their leaders, and especially those at higher levels of the district hierarchy, were willing to listen and to acknowledge their issues and questions. In one district teachers praised their board, stating, “The board is well informed and listens. They listen to the superintendent, who is also well-informed.” In another district, a union leader said, “Even if I don’t always feel that the administration is going to agree with me, I feel that they listen to me and hear me.”

**Engaging the community.** There were those who made the point that effective leaders not only communicate effectively within the organization but also beyond it. Engaging the community is an important element in successfully reforming schools, and effective leaders are those who purposefully and skillfully make these connections. A board member stated, “The community plays a large role in the success of the school. There is community involvement. We

can't view our success without looking at the community support." A union member agreed that leadership must reach out to those stakeholders: "If the board is going to pass a policy, there should be a full community involvement in the process, not just one board member with an idea and two people who agree."

### **Modeling Before Mandating**

The essence of effective leadership in guiding a change agenda, based on our interview data, is the ability of those in charge to "model before they mandate." They lead by example to help those around them make what are often difficult and frustrating changes. Leaders in our study districts relied on a shared vision, mission, and strategic plans to guide their focus on student learning. They modeled their own commitment to helping all students meet standard and they frequently referred to school or district plans, visions, and goals. They also actively modeled their beliefs that all students could learn, that everyone should be involved, that there needed to be clear structures of support, and that they establish common understandings.

**Shared vision.** In every district, there was intentionality about the direction they should take, and there was a plan for getting there. Teachers talked about "a common vision, a common focus – everyone wants to go there. We have a district vision. There is a common focus from district to building." A board member added, "We operate with a strategic plan, and that brings the community in. The community comes up with the plan. Every year there is a review of it: 'What have we accomplished? Where are we on this?'" A group of principals said of their district, "The focus of the superintendent and board is on strategic planning. We connect things we are doing at the buildings with the district plan. We are asked, 'Is it research-based and is it working?'" A district leader summarized the importance of vision, mission, and planning by stating, "The key to accountability is the simplicity of the focus. It is a pretty clear message to principals and staff about where we are going. Nothing else matters." It was described more colorfully as "chasing one chicken at a time."

**Learning for all.** As we proposed earlier in this report, effective leaders model their belief that *ALL* students can meet high expectations and assume that it is their responsibility to ensure that this belief is realized. Across participating districts, there was agreement that "We all have a common vision, and it is based on student achievement." As a district administrator stated, "If it's right for kids, you move forward on it." Another commented, "The vision and belief piece is key. We all agreed that all students can learn."

**Involved and responsible.** In more than one district, it was evident that expectations came from all levels of the organization and not exclusively from the district office. Leaders modeled their beliefs by getting involved and taking responsibility for change efforts. As one superintendent put it, "We are trying to drill that down into the organization through engaging in conversation about mission clarity." Another superintendent talked about leadership and stated, "When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.' People have to believe in where they are going. It is about focusing on learning. I want people to look at their job and say, 'I really play an important part, and I am helping drive this district'" A board member agreed and stated, "It is so appropriate that we would have people from all levels involved in writing the strategic plan."



**Clear structures.** Through example, educator leaders model how to create and implement strategic plans, and they frame the work to support their collective goals. In one district, the superintendent is “creating his vision by modeling it. Now people are being tolerant and accepting. They are beginning to think that his ideas are actually good ideas.” One interviewee said, “Our leaders pull us back so we can see the pattern of the big picture . . . so we can go back to work on a piece of it.”

**Common understanding.** As with communication, it is important to have everybody on the same page about what they are trying to accomplish. This occurs most efficiently if there is shared meaning and common vocabulary to talk about it. Leaders were purposeful in trying to establish common understanding and to use common language consistently in their work. For example, one district administrator said, “We are very intentional and have a common understanding and language.” According to one central office administrator, a practical way of establishing common language and expectations around student learning was to use a common curriculum throughout the district: “Common curriculum can leverage some powerful conversations.”

### **Empowering Others to Lead**

Effective leaders are purposeful about distributing authority. At the district office and throughout the buildings, we learned that administrators look for appropriate ways to share their responsibilities and resources by encouraging and supporting the efforts of others. For example, one superintendent described a deliberate intent to distribute leadership: “My approach is to affirm people where they are. I have attempted to remove fear from the conversations.” Teachers approved of this approach and agreed that empowerment “encourages people to try.” The result is that leadership is cultivated at all levels of the organization such that principals empower teachers and teachers empower the students and parents. “Empowerment is contagious,” according to one interviewee.

A key factor in sharing authority is respecting those you work with. “The climate of the discussions is a respectful climate, and people work at keeping it that way.” Teachers in these districts suggested that respect was pervasive and motivated them to become involved. “It’s easy to respect the leadership because they work so hard. It’s easier to work hard for someone who walks the walk.” They noted that the administration empowered them to be leaders and then assumed they would live up to their leadership goals. One teacher was direct in describing district leaders: “They trust our professionalism.”

When leaders empower others, it often involves giving control to individual sites to make decisions based on the specific needs of students and on the unique skills of those that work at the site. In these situations, the district office administrators are active managers. “We’ve changed how we look at resource allocation,” according to one district office representative. “Now the real focus is on allocating funds to do the work for ALL children. Schools with different needs get different resources, different attention.”

A critical factor in distributing leadership is filling positions with the best people and then “keeping them there.” Effective leaders give priority to this responsibility. A school board member in one district agreed, “Getting key people in key positions is paramount. You have to have somebody who can walk their talk and talk their walk.” In addition, several principals said

that when they hire, they look specifically for leadership potential. Stability is essential if shared authority is to be effective, a challenge that these educators' comments confirmed. "We don't have much turnover," declared one teacher. "People stay and grow inside the district. When you're well taken care of, you don't go looking around." A union leader agreed and stated, "If you are hiring a new superintendent every three or four years, it [school reform] isn't going to happen." The transition that occurs on school boards can be challenging as well, according to leaders in several districts. As one pointed out, "It is tricky with the board changing every two years. Making sure the focus sustains itself through changing board members is critical."

### Providing Support

Providing support can be tricky. Leaders provided support through their visibility, by their awareness of school and district activities, through their efforts to hold people accountable, and by promoting professional growth. Not surprising, however, support is not always perceived as "support." For example, leaders may provide support, as we mentioned, by holding people accountable. In doing so, leaders support the vision and mission at hand and portray a serious intent and commitment. This may provide people the confidence that the direction of focus and work at hand are confirmed and stable. On the other hand, some may perceive accountability as a top down control tactic that results in loss of creative license or academic freedom. Although there was variance among the districts, and certainly not all individuals were in favor of receiving "support" because of their perception that the support stifled them, leaders worked to help others understand the value of the *support* they provided.

An analogy that applies to this issue is the relationship between a kite and a string. When a kite is flying high into the air and the force of the wind causes a tug on the string, some might have the perspective that the string is holding the kite back. "If only the string were cut, the kite could fly free." However, the truth of the matter is, if the string was cut, the kite would fall out of the sky. Even though it may seem to some that the string is a hindrance to the personal freedom desired by the kite, the string in a real way is "supporting" the kite in its flight mission. For leaders in our study, they not only provided support, but also tried to help others understand the support and to see it as the string that holds the kite up, rather than a string that holds the kite back.

Educators in these districts offered insight into ways in which their leaders offered support without micromanaging the work. This happens, according to principals in one district, when "our leadership lays out the expectations, but we have freedom to do what needs to be done." Board members in another district conceded the parameters of their authority: "The board understands its role as policymaker, and we are not micromanagers." In one district, for example, teachers described their building and district leadership as those who "encourage, help, and guide rather than manage." Although there was variance among districts, leaders were described as visible, accountable, accessible, approachable, knowledgeable, and credible.

**Visible.** Related to their ability to provide support without becoming controlling was the ability of a leader to maintain a high level of visibility and an acute awareness of what happens daily "in the trenches" and in the community. In one district, for example, the board and central office administrators visit a school for breakfast each month. They receive a progress report on school improvement efforts that allows the school to share their successes and challenges. One principal stated, "It gives the board the opportunity to see what kind of great work has been

going on. The board sees that the buildings are very different. They strongly see why we have done the change in school culture. They see that we can all be learners and can work on our practices.”

**Accountable.** Accountability is an important aspect of leadership, and leaders in this study shared an expertise for using accountability as a support strategy. Principals said that the central office administrators are in their buildings, making it easier to have dialogue with them and to get “support from colleagues and downtown.” Principals talked about holding their teachers accountable in one district: “We let them know we trust what they are doing, and that yes, we are going to be checking on their progress. You have to allow that space as they grow. Sometimes you have to change behaviors first, and attitudes and beliefs will come later.”

**Accessible.** It is important that those in leadership positions are readily accessible and that their function is supportive. As one interviewee reported, “Our leadership is visible and accessible at all levels. Leadership is involved and focused.” In another district, colleagues found their superintendent to be “an advisor to whom you could ask questions, receive advice and be provided feedback.” Teachers in one district described their school board this way: “The Board is supportive, collaborative, and cooperative. They are very open and accessible. They are very active in schools, serving on parent groups, and visible at activities. They know and see what is going on.”

**Approachable.** Approachable leaders was important in many of the study districts. Co-workers in one district provided this assessment of their top leader: “The superintendent is so approachable and people feel very comfortable and feel very willing to work with [him/her].” In another instance, school board members were viewed as involved, visible, and approachable. Leaders being approachable was important for building relational trust through open dialogue. According to administrators in one district, “The superintendent has modeled transparency, and all administrators have the courage to sit down and dialogue. There is mutual respect and a high degree of professionalism.”

**Knowledgeable.** Interviewees consistently noted that leaders possess essential knowledge about various educational issues. This was true for leaders throughout the districts but seemed particularly true for superintendents. In one district, a board member observed about the superintendent, “[Our superintendent] has a real strong background in the curriculum, and I think that is going to help us a lot.” A group of principals agreed, “The superintendent is a great resource. [S/he] reads about education and related topics and is very knowledgeable.” According to another principal, “The superintendent isn’t afraid to learn. [S/he]’s very knowledgeable about why we make decisions and the effect it will have on our students.”

**Credible.** Finally, there was agreement among the interviewees that successful leaders have credibility among their peers. Leaders are trusted and seen as connected to school reform efforts. The issue of relational trust in particular seemed paramount. For example, one union leader said, “[Our superintendent] is a very safe woman you can talk to without getting worried about getting axed in the back later on down the road.” Additionally, credibility was associated with how connected leaders were to the reform effort beyond the district. For example, one board member commented, “The superintendent has offered a lot of help. [He] is absolutely the catalyst for our success in this reform. [He] stays in touch with the state and OSPI.”

### **Characteristics of Leaders by Role in Effective Districts**

In this study, our interviews with representatives from 10 effective districts across the state allowed us to document similarities among districts and to identify characteristics that define the leaders of those districts. We would also like to provide insight into characteristics that are common to leaders based on their roles. Specifically, we examined similar behaviors, beliefs, and practices among superintendents and other district office administrators, school board members, building principals, teacher leaders, and teacher association representatives. Although there was clearly a variance within each group, there were also commonalities and consistent findings across all districts. The following discussion elaborates our findings on each of these groups.

#### **Superintendent and Central Office Administrator Leadership**

Educators in these districts consistently identified the superintendent and central office administration as key leaders in initiating and sustaining educational change. According to their co-workers, the superintendent and district office administrators assume most of the responsibility across the district for establishing direction, modeling reform, providing support, and utilizing personnel effectively. One person stated, “Student achievement and WASL improvement are very important to the superintendent.” Leaders demonstrated an unwavering commitment to educational reform and focused the district’s efforts and resources on student learning. One teacher said, “We are blessed with a very strong leader in our superintendent who has set the standard that we need in our school buildings, especially when we are talking about improving education . . . powerful teaching and learning.”

Effective superintendents and district office administrators communicate openly and work together as a team, according to those who work with them. Educators in one district gave the following assessment of their leader: “The superintendent has modeled transparency and there is mutual respect and a high degree of professionalism as to how administration treats teachers. Disagreements are at the professional level, not the personal level.” In one district a principal stated, “The superintendent doesn’t pretend to know all the answers, and he surrounds himself with experts who are in the trenches. He has been able to bring to the district some key folks, particularly at the administrative level, that have a real vision for kids. What I see at the top is very exciting, and I think that does trickle down.”

Educators appreciated the willingness of their superintendents and district office administrators to stay abreast of what happens in the schools. This was not only seen as positive for individual teachers, but it also improved relationships with the unions. According to a teacher, “I think it is a very positive thing [when] superintendents go into classes and see what is going on. They are more than just someone who rubber stamps things.” They agreed as well that effective district office administrators recognized the importance of establishing and maintaining a good relationship with the union. Central office administrators knowing first hand what is going on in schools helped build relational trust with union officials as well. As one board member remarked, “We are more innovative because our superintendent has a great working relationship with the union.”

## School Board Leadership

School board members sometimes struggled with the role they played in supporting school successes. However, three specific recurring themes related to school boards emerged: (1) supporting a mission, (2) guiding policy, and (3) paying attention to progress.

Educators described their school boards as working together with the administration to develop and support a mission to educate all students at a high level. “We are very comfortable working with [the board],” according to one district administrator. “They treat everyone with respect. They want to be involved. They are eager to learn about the academic and student learning piece. They educate themselves on what’s going on in schools.” Another person added, “People are comfortable with [having] the board around and involved in activities.” A superintendent noted, “[Our] board is a very professional board in that they understand how to grow. Most of them are personally involved in different aspects of the district.” In another district a board member added, “We [board members] go to the schools and show up in the classroom. The board wants everyone to be at fullest potential, not simply graduate students.”

In addition to being supportive of the mission to educate all students, educators consistently described their respective boards as a group of individuals that clearly understood the role of a board. Both educators and board members described the board’s role as policy makers and overseers. Every district had participants that mentioned the board did not overstep the boundaries of their role. Specifically, there was agreement that a board should help define and support the district vision without attempting to manage day-to-day details and decision-making. A superintendent praised his board for their ability to do this: “I feel so blessed to be working with a board that is very interested but willing to stand back and let us be administrators.” This was not always easy, according to one school board member. “I sometimes feel like a fifth wheel with all the strong leadership around us. We struggle sometimes in understanding how we are leaders ourselves. How can we add to [the superintendent’s] leadership?”

One of the most significant ways boards were involved in providing leadership was clearly by monitoring progress. Boards found a great deal of leverage in asking administrators and teachers questions about their school improvement plans and asking for evidence of progress. Looking for evidence of progress was common among the districts, however, there was a clear range of formality to this accountability. Some boards listened to reports, some requested reports, some required specific evidence of progress. Asking for evidence of progress was viewed as a clear role of the board and was viewed by school personnel as a show of support.

As there was a range in the formality of accountability, there was also a range in assertiveness related to gathering and analyzing data. Some boards appeared to go along with administrative leadership without question and were quite pleased with what they were seeing. Others appeared somewhat aggressive and “data savvy.” As one district official described his board, “They are continually asking for data to analyze and asking for data analysis to be done.” Regardless of the formality or assertiveness of the boards, a common element was that they used data to carry on sustained dialogues with the superintendents and received updates on school-level progress.

### Principal Leadership

Respondents offered definite and consistent opinions about building administrators, often describing them as the key leaders in implementing school reform. Successful building principals were recognized for being strong and deliberate in their focus on student learning and for finding ways to facilitate and support improvements to teaching and learning. “The direction may have come from the central office, but the decision-making and carrying out of the work has been at the level with the principals,” according to a union representative.

Interview data revealed that effective building leaders do not shy away from difficult questions or discussions, and in fact, they show moral courage in addressing those issues. A superintendent stated, “I want someone who has courage and pride in acting on things that will make things happen for kids.” One interviewee shared an example: “Now they [principals] meet monthly and talk about educational leadership, not about how to run a building. They talk about high expectations for students, needing to know what the curriculum is, and what it looks like. I think those discussions are completely different than what they were in the past.”

Effective building leaders do more than guide school reform efforts, however. They also give teachers the space and the resources to do their jobs. One teacher said, “My principal is a buffer and problem solver.” Several other teachers reported that their principal “takes a lot of heat from things we should be doing. Our principal is a shield.” Teachers also praised their principals for being “advocates” and for encouraging “out-of-the-box thinking, opportunities to be creative, and risk-taking.” As one principal admitted, “In order for me to keep up, I need to be with the teachers, learning with them. A principal’s job is bigger than it’s ever been.”

### Teacher Leadership

District leaders are committed to developing strong teacher leadership within their districts, and they provided varied opportunities to encourage and support teachers in fulfilling these roles. Our data showed clearly that teachers are viewed as the ones who “make it happen for students.” “The teachers are the core,” said one school board member, and a union official agreed. “It’s the teachers who keep it moving, doing the work, working together.” A principal noted that while teachers did not initiate the reform movement, “Some have stepped into those roles.”

Teacher leaders have high expectations and standards for themselves and for their students. Their awareness of the change process extends beyond the classroom. A board member said, “There is a great sense of ownership among the teachers around what is going on in the district. Teachers hold each other to high standards.” One superintendent praised teacher leaders for their integrity and perseverance. “The strong leaders are using the strategy that kids can learn. It is not pass/fail mentality. It is that they have got to learn.” On a practical note, many of the ways teachers provided leadership included assisting with curriculum and assessment alignment, providing district or building level professional development for peers, going through National Board Certification, leading classroom observations and debrief sessions, facilitating professional learning communities, and heading up book studies or action research projects, to name a few.

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## Teachers' Association<sup>1</sup> Leadership

There was not a common theme among the districts regarding the role of teachers' associations. In some cases they functioned as strong advocates for the teachers and somewhat distanced from change efforts. In other cases, they seemed to be among the strongest proponents of the reform efforts taking place within the districts. In still other cases, the associations were seen neither as a significant hindrance nor a help.

District administrators and union representatives agreed, however, that unions find themselves in the difficult position of advocating for their members, while at the same time attempting to support significant school reforms. One union member reflected on this challenge: "There is a constructive tension between labor and management in this district, and there are times when that constructive tension leads us to do our best work and come up with a product that reflects a lot of thought. There are times when that tension will still cause things to fall apart, but what is most important is to cool off, get back together, and figure it out." Another union leader said, "I think a hard part about this job is trying to balance collegiality and advocacy. In other words, is it more important to remain on good terms with the district or be an advocate for the members? It is more important for me to be an advocate, but it is also important for me to get along with the district." Finally, a district administrator summed up the dilemma by stating, "The union has to ride the fence between being an advocate for the teacher and being a professional organization and supporting student/teacher achievement. I personally believe we have a responsibility to do both."

That being the case, it was not surprising that district administrators were purposeful in their attempts to establish positive relationships with union representatives. "We continually try to find the right avenue to engage the teachers' union in being a partner in improving teaching and learning," according to one superintendent. A union leader's perspective was similar: "We work as a partner with the district, and we are looking at the big picture." A strong relationship between the union and the district was particularly important when contentious issues arose. As one superintendent conceded, "The union president has come to us as the protector of the contract. We are working hard to open her eyes to teaching and learning. We are making some progress. The relationship piece is good, even though we don't always see eye to eye. It hasn't gotten in the way of our respect for each other."

Teachers' association leaders appreciated being seen as equal partners. A superintendent said: "The union is committed to the contract and they are partners in moving the district forward. There is mutual understanding. You can't move forward without collaboration. There is no problem that is unsolvable. If we unilaterally made decisions without the union, there would be resistance. The key is involvement." A union leader acknowledged the district's interest in collaboration: "I believe the top man in our district realized that if the association leadership is involved, it is much easier to sell ideas to peers."

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<sup>1</sup> In most districts, educators refer to a "teachers' association" rather than to a "union." In this report, we use the terms interchangeably.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

### Summary

When we began this study, we did not want to design a study that would inevitably conclude with the finding: “Leadership is important.” It seemed to us that the *importance* of leadership has been established through decades of research and was a foregone conclusion. Instead, our intent was to conduct an inductive study to describe the *characteristics* of leadership in districts that are experiencing relatively high degrees of success. At the beginning of our research process, we began designing our study focusing on the “leadership styles” of the superintendents. However, upon review of several of our previous effective school and district reports and field notes, we revised the intent of our study. We decided the focus of the study should *not* be to describe the personal traits of the superintendents; but the goal of the study should be to describe the characteristics of leadership throughout the effective districts.

To this end, this follow-up study has provided several important things: (1) It confirmed many findings from the previous study; (2) It described distributed leadership through the lens of effective districts; (3) it described characteristics of leaders in effective districts; (4) and, it described how leadership is manifested through various individual and group roles.

In our previous study, *From Compliance to Commitment*, we described what the characteristics of 10 effective districts were. In the present study, we took the next step to describe how these characteristics came about. Responses reflected the complexity of leadership within an educational setting and highlighted the difficulty of balancing local priorities, community characteristics, district structures, and interpersonal dynamics unique to these settings. Our analyses confirmed important patterns and themes regarding the *characteristics of effective districts* (as previously reported):

- Commitment to school reform
- Ownership for student learning
- Distributed leadership
- Collaborative organizational environment
- Focus on adult learning
- Trust and relationship-building

In addition to describing how the effective district characteristics developed, the present study uncovered characteristics that were common to the leaders in these districts. The most prominent of these characteristics were: (1) an ability to communicate effectively, (2) a tendency to lead by example before mandating changes, (3) a skill for empowering others to lead, and (4) a capacity for providing support.

Finally, we explored the various roles different groups play in the study districts. We described the roles of the superintendent and central office, school boards, principals, teachers, and teachers’ associations. Developing open communication, relational trust, and effective use of data were central to the comments of each group.



## Conclusions

Many believe the success of a district stands on the shoulders of the superintendent. In essence, the role many expect them to play is actually “super”intendent. It is true that the leadership provided from the superintendent is important and necessary. We would simply add that it is not sufficient. Findings from this study suggest that leadership from the superintendent needs to permeate the school organization. To do so the system must be aligned to a common vision.

It is tempting to view leadership from superintendents or others as a personality trait or individual characteristic. That is, “there are people who are leaders” and “people who are not.” If this is the assumption we make, then the solution to educational problems such as school functioning and low student academic achievement is simply a matter of finding the best person and letting them design the district or school according to their own views of what is best.

The difficulty with this assumption, of course, is that it is not completely accurate. It is not uncommon for “great leaders” to be only moderately successful when they find themselves in different district settings, or for “average leaders” to be very successful in different circumstances. Further, charisma can fade over time, and non-charismatic individuals can become recognized as meaningful influences as they live out their leadership role.

While the implications of Philip Zimbardo’s, *The Lucifer Effect* (2007) go far beyond educational leadership, some of the dynamics he notes underscore the difficulty for a charismatic view of leadership. In Zimbardo’s view, social situations can powerfully transform human beliefs and actions. He concludes, “social situations can have more profound effects on the behavior and mental functioning of individuals, groups, and national leaders than we might believe possible” (p. 211). As such, one’s leadership might be more a matter of the nature of the organizational (leadership) system than it is of an individual personality. The roles and expectations of all those in the leadership system lead to success, not just the organizational leader.

If we do not succumb to the charismatic leadership assumption, then we might “locate” leadership in a system of roles, or an overall organization focused on the key features that can encourage student success. Our 2004 report concluded that leadership is only one feature of a successful district, albeit an important feature. In the current study, we have again found that leadership is crucial. However, we have identified elements of a leadership structure that are important to the overall functioning of the district to produce improved student academic achievement.

We set out to inductively define characteristics of people in leadership. In the final analysis, however, our conclusion is that leadership is more than a person, it is a system of people. To be effective, the system must have a direction and must be going in a common direction. So, the issue seems to be, what does an important leader like a superintendent, central office administrator, principal, teacher, board member, or union representative do? They must all look at the role they play in supporting a system of leadership. Leadership is not simply a personal trait. In our study, we found it to be a situational system of communication that led to common vision, language, and action.

## IMPLICATIONS

The districts in this study confirmed the importance of the characteristics that have led to their effectiveness. In addition, they described how leaders developed those characteristics, they described characteristics of those leaders, and they highlighted roles different individuals and groups play in creating an effective district. There are many important implications for the findings in this study.

Obviously, leadership is important. More specifically, though, distributed leadership is important. There were clearly leaders throughout the districts that made the districts successful. Findings from this study move us beyond the typical understanding of the superintendent as THE only leader, to the superintendent as AN important leader. The 10 districts in this study have clear, strong, active leadership at many levels of their respective organizations.

For leadership to emerge throughout a district there must be a common vision for the district. Participants in this study were engaged in deep discussions about first and second order change; the focus was on deep rooted philosophical change. They developed strategic plans, and they clearly had a vision and a mission. Without a clear direction for a district, leadership is unlikely to emerge and therefore cannot be distributed. Having this clearly defined direction is key to leadership. Therefore, it is critical for superintendents and boards to manage the process for establishing a common district vision.

There must be a wide-spread commitment to school reform within the district. Unless the vision is clear, and unless people embrace the mission, it is unlikely leadership will emerge. Therefore, it is important to have or maintain an open dialogue about the need for school reform. Although the study districts had been “reforming” for years, they still reflected regularly on the need to reform and sustained a moral imperative for change.

Effective leadership is situational and systemic. It is important to recognize that a successful educational leader in one building or situation may not be successful in another due to the nature of the system itself. Based on the findings in this study, we would caution a district about think they could hire a “super”intendent to fix a district. Although the superintendent can provide important leadership and serve as a catalyst, the role of the superintendent is to create conditions for other leaders to emerge. A superintendent cannot fix a district unless the district wants “fixing.”

School and district leadership involves having common vision, common language, and common work. Therefore, everyone in the system must take an honest look at themselves, the mission, and the work. We believe good leaders beget good leaders. School boards lead better when superintendents are effective leaders; superintendents lead better when teachers and principals provide leadership; educators throughout the organization lead better when teacher associations do likewise. With the common vision guiding the work, leadership can be contagious.

Keys to much of the success in these study district were developing a clear vision, communicating effectively, and developing relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Therefore, these are three areas for districts to carefully consider early in their own district and school improvement processes.

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Washington School Research Center  
Seattle Pacific University  
3307 Third Avenue West, Suite 318  
Seattle, WA 98119  
Phone: 206-378-5379  
Fax: 206-286-7393  
Web: [www.spu.edu/wsrc](http://www.spu.edu/wsrc)