



## Sharing Leadership Responsibilities Results in Achievement Gains

**By: Lew Armistead**

Collective, not individual, leadership in schools has a greater impact on student achievement; when principals and teachers share leadership responsibilities, student achievement is higher; and schools having high student achievement also display a vision for student achievement and teacher growth. Those are just a few of the insights into school leadership presented in a new report, *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*.

Presented by the Wallace Foundation, the 338-page report attempted to connect leadership and learning.

“We need to know what successful leaders do, and we need to know how they do it,” the report reads. “About these questions, there is still much to be learned.”

Connected by researchers at the University of Minnesota Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement and at the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the study looked at 43 school districts in nine states. It studied leadership both at the school and district levels. In approximately 180 schools in these 43 districts, researchers used surveys and interviews with principals, teachers, other staff members, district personnel, school board members, community leaders and state-level leaders to collect data. Additionally, they analyzed student achievement data and conducted classroom observations.

Four core beliefs formed the perspective on leadership in the study, according to the authors:

“**First**, we believe an adequate analysis of leadership must identify all relevant sources of education leadership, examine actual leadership practices, and distinguish among the effects of school-, district-, and state-level leadership on student learning.

“**Second**, as we began our work five years ago, we argued that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school, after controlling for student intake factors. Five years later, we are even more confident about this claim. Significant effects on student learning depend on creating synergy across a

range of human and institutional resources, so that the overall impact adds up to something worthwhile. Among the many people who work hard to improve students learning, leaders are uniquely well positioned to ensure these synergistic effects.

**“Third**, a critical understanding of leadership recognizes two core functions. One function is to provide direction; the other is to exercise influence. This is not an oversimplification. These two functions characterize many models of leadership. Each of them is central to initiatives aimed at improving student learning.

**“Finally**, leaders who strike a proper balance between stability and change emphasize two priorities in the direction they provide and the influence they exercise; they work to develop and support people to do their best, and they work to redesign their organizations to improve effectiveness.”

The study looked at “collective leadership” in schools which was defined as “the sum of influence exercised on school decisions by those educators, parents and students associated with the school.” Positive effects were found comparing collective to individual leadership. Among them were:

- Collective leadership has a stronger influence on student learning than any individual source of leadership.
- Almost all people associated with high-performing schools have greater influence on school decisions than is the case with people in low performing schools. High-performing schools have ‘fatter’ or ‘thicker’ decision-making structures, not simply ‘flatter’ ones, and leadership in these schools is more ‘intense.’
- Compared to all teacher respondents, teachers from high-performing schools attribute greater influence to teacher teams, parents, and students.
- In all schools, principals and district leaders exercise the most influence on decisions. However, they do not lose influence as others gain it. In other words, influence in schools is not a fixed sum or a zero-sum game. Collective leadership occurs, in part, because effective principals encourage others to join in.
- Teacher motivation had the strongest relationship with student achievement.

When looking at parent involvement as part of collective leadership, the researchers found that greater district level support for greater parental involvement in schools led to more diversity of membership on site councils. However, district leadership did not impact how open principals were to community and parental involvement outside of site councils.

“It is up to individual school leaders to go beyond simple district support in order to develop meaningful parent involvement,” the report reads.

The study also found that collective parent-teacher influence is higher in schools serving more affluent students.

Additionally ...”schools with higher levels of collective parent-teacher influence were also those that created a culture of collective leadership and responsibility, among school staff and within the wider community. Even when districts emphasize the importance of public engagement, however, district policies tend to ‘trickle down’ to schools only in the form of mandates for representation on school councils—a weak strategy for distributing leadership. Without better models and support, principals will tend to focus on the daily pressures of running the school, not on creating a more democratic or inclusive leadership culture.”

Shared leadership, defined as “teachers’ influence over, and participation in, school-wide decisions with principals” for the purpose of the study, also led to greater student achievement.

“...strong professional relationships—constituting professional community—encourage teachers to become leaders,” the report reads. “Professional community amounts to more than support and more than team discussion or data analysis. It is based on shared instructional values, a common focus on student learning (including assessment), collaboration in the development of curriculum and instruction, and the purposeful sharing of practices.”

Findings regarding shared leadership include:

- Leadership practices targeted directly at teachers’ instruction (i.e., instructional leadership) have significant, although indirect, effects on student achievement.
- When principals and teachers share leadership, teachers’ working relationships are stronger and student achievement is higher.
- Leadership effects on student learning occur largely because leadership strengthens professional community; teachers’ engagement in professional community, in turn, fosters the use of instructional practices that are associated with student achievement.
- The professional community effect may reflect the creation of a supportive school climate that encourages student effort above and beyond that provided in individual classrooms.
- The variable of principal-teacher trust is less significant than instructional leadership and shared leadership; still, it is part of a shared leadership culture that is associated with high-achieving schools.

Distributed leadership was another aspect of the study with a focus on the role principals play in patterns of leadership distribution.

“School personnel rarely attributed leadership behaviors and influence to a single person,” the study reported. “The array of individuals or groups identified as providing leadership included a mix of principals, assistant principals, teachers in formal leadership roles, teachers informally recognized by peers as influential, parents, district administrators and professional staff, and external consultants linked to curriculum, program, and teacher development initiatives at the school level. Overall, principals stood out because they were more likely than any other group to be simultaneously involved in multiple leadership responsibilities.”

The report identified three patterns of leadership distribution.

Pattern 1: Principals in these schools actively collaborate with influential teacher leaders and outside experts to address particular improvement initiatives. At the same time, teachers collaborate with one another, and teachers in instructional leadership roles work across curriculum and grade-level boundaries. These schools had high collective leadership ratings on the teacher survey measures.

Pattern 2: Principals in these schools work on multiple initiatives, but relatively independently of teacher leaders and external change agents. Teacher leadership is limited to traditional grade-level or discipline structures, and there is less active teacher collaboration overall.

Pattern 3: Principals in these schools maintain administrative oversight of school improvement activities, but make little effort to influence their implementation. Key teachers or external actors are responsible for various improvement initiatives, but teachers attribute little influence to the enactment of those roles. Teachers do not report a culture of teacher collaboration within and across school organizational structures.”

The report cautioned that distributing leadership should not be seen as a way to reduce a principal’s workload.

“In our sample, principals in schools with high levels of collective and shared leadership were involved in many efforts to improve teaching and learning in addition to their management responsibilities, and they rarely assigned purely administrative work to other professionals. Their work differed, however, from teacher leaders, district support personnel, and key consultants, whose influence was more likely to be goal- or initiative-specific. Principals perform important ‘helicopter’ and boundary-spanning roles not typically performed by others, not taken by others in schools with more passive principals.

More key points regarding role distribution reported include:

- “The bureaucratic allocation of responsibility does not necessarily result in the transfer or

development of influence. Less formal patterns of leadership distribution can be enacted through bureaucratic structures that appear, on paper, remarkably similar. For example, the case-study schools in our sample all had multi-stakeholder school-leadership committees, and they all had similar teacher-leader positions; however, the actual distribution of leadership influence varied.

- “While there are many sources of leadership in schools, principals remain the central source. Principals are involved in many leadership activities; others who act as leaders in the school ordinarily do so in respect to one or a few initiatives.
- “How leadership is distributed in schools depends on what is to be accomplished, on the availability of professional expertise, and on the principals’ preferences regarding the use of professional expertise. Different initiatives within the same school may exhibit distinct patterns of leadership distribution.
- “Leadership is more distributed for practices aimed at ‘developing people’ and ‘managing instruction’ than it is for ‘setting directions’ and ‘structuring the workplace.’
- “No single pattern of leadership distribution is consistently linked to the quality of student learning.”

Additionally, the study looked at instructional leadership and its impact on student achievement. Among findings were:

- Teachers in high-performing schools reported high levels of Instructional Climate, defined as “the steps that principals take to set a tone or culture in the building that supports continual professional learning.”
- Principals whose teachers rate them high on Instructional Climate emphasize the value of research-based strategies and are able to apply them in their own school setting.
- Principals and teachers agreed that three specific practices made significant contributions to the improvement of teachers’ classroom practices—
  - Focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement;
  - Keeping track of teachers’ professional development needs; and
  - Creating structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate.

The report goes on to look at district leadership, data-based decision-making for student learning, state relations with districts, and integrating the elements of effective leadership, among other topics.

An executive summary of the 338-page report can be found at <http://tiny.cc/ey58u> and the full report can be found at <http://tiny.cc/eub15>

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