

# Balanced Leadership for Student Learning: An Overview

*Discovering and developing the specific principal leadership skills that research shows have the best effects on student and teacher success*





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## The Balanced Leadership Timeline

**2003:** McREL publishes a report titled *Balanced Leadership: What 30 Years of Research Tells Us About the Effect of Leadership on Student Achievement* that reveals the findings of a major meta-analysis examining the effects of leadership practices on student achievement.

**2005:** McREL partners with ASCD to publish *School Leadership That Works: From Research To Results*, which expands on the 2003 report findings and gives guidance on providing strong leadership for better schools.

**2006:** McREL develops and begins providing professional learning sessions to school leaders about the Balanced Leadership insights and recommendations.

**2007:** McREL publishes *The Balanced Leadership Framework: Connecting Vision with Action*, a booklet to help school leaders apply the research findings to their own leadership behavior.

**2015:** McREL and ASCD publish *Balanced Leadership for Powerful Learning*, a book which provides ready-to-use tools and activities school leaders and teams can use to enact the 21 responsibilities.

**2021:** McREL updates its Balanced Leadership professional learning program and resources with a greater focus on leadership's impact on student learning, sharing additional insights from high-reliability organization principles, improvement science, and the What Matters Most framework.

# Balanced Leadership for Student Learning: An Overview

*Discovering and developing the specific principal leadership skills that research shows have the best effects on student and teacher success*

Effective school-level leaders impact student achievement. Research has demonstrated it, as long ago as McREL's original research first reported in the 2005 ASCD publication *School Leadership That Works* (Marzano et al.) and confirmed as recently as 2021 in the Wallace Foundation report *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research* (Grissom et al.).

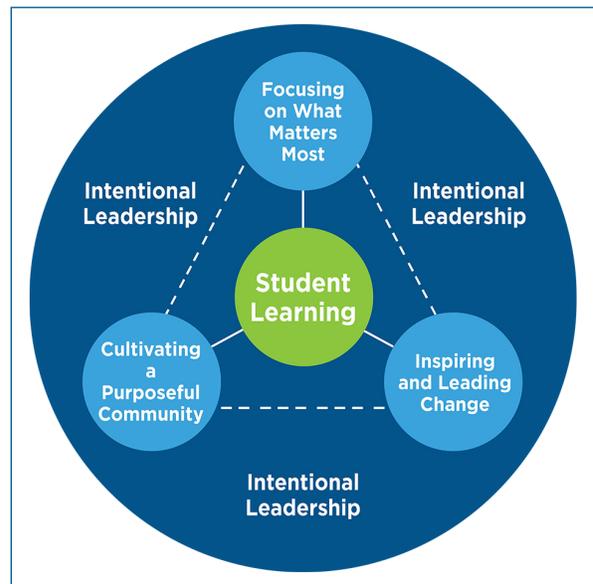
But what defines **effective** leadership, exactly? What does it look like? And does it come from innate characteristics certain leaders were born with, or is it something that can be learned and applied by all current and prospective leaders?

McREL's analysis of research found that effective leadership is not about leader *personality or style*; rather, it's about a set of 21 *specific actions and behaviors* that are significantly associated with higher levels of student achievement. We then translated these 21 actions into a framework which describes the knowledge, skills, strategies, and tools leaders need to positively impact student achievement, and developed a professional learning program to help current and aspiring principals and central office administrators learn to enact this knowledge in their routine leadership actions.

Our findings, framework, and professional learning program represent an integration of quantitative research, theoretical insights, and professional wisdom about effective leadership. We've named this body of knowledge and professional learning **Balanced Leadership for Student Learning™**.

## The Balanced Leadership for Student Learning Framework

Effective school leadership should be centered on supporting student learning, which is at the heart of our Balanced Leadership for Student Learning framework, shown here.



Supporting student learning are the three primary components of effective school leadership:

1. Establishing and maintaining a clear **schoolwide focus on what matters most**: delivering high-quality instructional experiences for all students.
2. **Inspiring and leading change** in school processes, programs, personnel, professional learning, and other operations that are needed in order to create better conditions for high-quality teaching and learning.

### 3. Cultivating a purposeful school

**community** that is united by a common vision for what they want the school to be and has a shared belief that, working together, they have what it takes to make that vision come true.

Each of these three components operates within a landscape of **intentional leadership**.

Effective school and district leaders are intentional about their leadership based on the needs of their students, teachers and support staff, parents, and community.

School-level leaders need to identify the strengths of their school, the areas in need of improvement, and the changes that need to occur to produce better results—and then they need to match their own leadership behaviors to the ones

research has shown to effect positive change.

Sometimes, leaders need to be directive, leading from the top down if changes are needed quickly. At other times, the same leaders need to include others within the school to engage in shared decision-making, especially for more complex issues and initiatives that need broad ownership and engagement with the solutions. Neither approach works in all situations and leaders must determine what their school needs in the moment from their leadership and apply the leadership responsibilities in ways that help advance the work of teaching and learning.

Drawing from McREL’s experience supporting schools in the process of continuous improvement (Goodwin et al., 2018), intentional leadership creates and leverages a school-wide sense of moral purpose to drive everyone’s decision-making and sustain team momentum for improvement.

Let’s look now at each of the three components of Balanced Leadership in more depth.

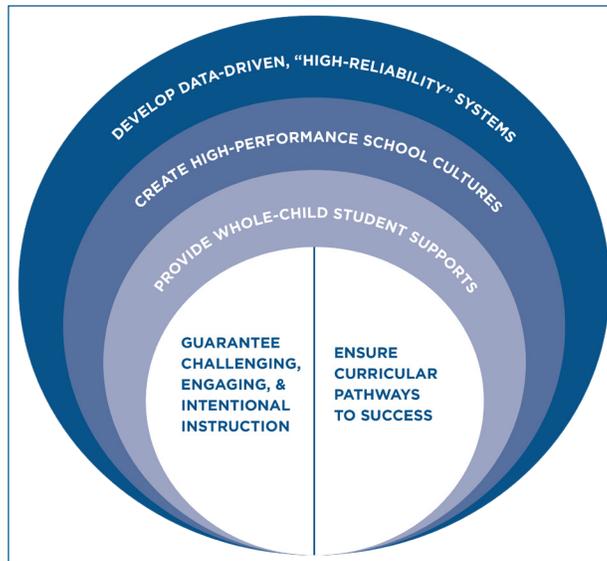
## Component #1: Focusing on What Matters Most

A critical aspect of effective leadership is knowing where to focus your efforts. Effective leaders focus on different levers for change than do ineffective leaders.

McREL’s What Matters Most® framework

(Goodwin, 2011), shown here, is a synopsis of research findings on the key components of effective schools. The framework’s five components are inextricably integrated with effective instructional leadership practice.

Providing high-quality instruction in every classroom is one the most powerful correlates of school



performance. Schools need to guarantee that every student consistently receives **challenging, engaging, and intentional instruction**, regardless of which teacher(s) they have.

Decades of studies show that a clearly articulated and aligned curriculum that reflects high expectations for all learners can significantly raise overall school performance by, in effect, ensuring that all students benefit from **curricular pathways to success**.

High-performing schools catch students “before they fall” by intervening early to address their academic needs and their well-being, thus, providing them with **whole-child student supports**.

The presence of a positive school culture—where all teachers commit to the success of their students and work together to identify and respond to student learning needs—has

been shown to be more positively linked to school success than students' socioeconomic status. Effective school leaders foster **high-performing school cultures**.

Ultimately, the key to school performance is the ability to use data to identify opportunities for improvement, bright spots to build on, and guide course corrections. Together this establishes a **data-driven, high-reliability system**.

Effective principals help their school community understand and focus on delivering these five components of What Matters Most for their students.

## Component #2: Inspiring and Leading Change

Leading change is about the active role principals and other school leaders take as they recognize the needs of their students, staff, and communities, initiate change to address these needs, and support their faculty, staff, and community members through implementation of the change initiatives. Change initiatives can be anything from the implementation of new programs, policies, and procedures to making changes to personnel, roles, and responsibilities.

To do this well, it's valuable for leaders to understand how people can perceive the same change effort very differently and how to manage and guide people through those changes. Some stakeholders may view an improvement initiative as relatively straightforward, logical, aligned with their beliefs, and easy to implement. For them, they perceive the initiative as having *first-order* implications. Other stakeholders may view the same effort as more complex—a change that challenges their established norms and beliefs, requires them to rethink their roles and responsibilities, and/or requires them to engage in significant new professional learning. In other words, for these stakeholders, the change has *second-order* implications.

This highlights the need for school leaders to anticipate and recognize which changes will be perceived with first- and second-order implications by which individuals and stakeholder groups, so that they can select appropriate leadership practices and strategies to support everyone as the new initiative is implemented. Doing so enhances the likelihood of sustainable initiatives and a positive impact on achievement. Failing to do so will just as likely result in a negative impact on achievement (Waters et al., 2003).

These findings inform not only how McREL conceptualizes change but how we support principals in leading (not merely managing) change.

## Component #3: Cultivating a Purposeful Community

Over the past two decades, many schools have adopted professional learning communities (PLCs). Research shows, though, that PLCs have had mixed results on student achievement, likely because mere structural changes (such as adding meetings to the school calendar) do little to change people's actual practices. What's more important is making a substantive change to a school's culture, such as how teachers interact with one another and use data, and cultivating a **purposeful community**. A purposeful school community is one that works with intention to focus on effective use of high-leverage practices and creating a supportive, can-do environment in which each student and staff member flourishes. Teachers in a purposeful community have collective efficacy, a belief that they, as a team, have what it takes to help every student at their school succeed.

Effective principals create purposeful communities by working with stakeholders to establish a shared moral purpose and outcomes that matter to all stakeholders. They also take an asset-based orientation that capitalizes on their school's bright spots, and they use all available assets—including the cultural assets

and voices of the school’s students and families and the collective capacity of the community to make a difference for each student.

In short, a purposeful community is about developing trust, purpose, and collective efficacy to achieve equitable outcomes for all students.

## The 21 Specific Responsibilities of a School Leader

As mentioned, there are 21 specific leadership responsibilities within Balanced Leadership, each with its own positive, empirical relationship to student learning. These responsibilities include things like a principal’s knowledge of and involvement in teaching and learning, their visibility in the school, and their purposeful actions to develop capacity and knowledge of staff related to evidence-based teaching practices. The table on page 5 summarizes the 21 responsibilities.

Further analysis shows that **“95% of the time, when these responsibilities are fulfilled effectively by strong leaders, we will find higher average levels of student achievement than we would in comparable schools where these responsibilities are not fulfilled effectively”** (Goodwin et al., 2015, p. 6).

## The Balancing Act in Effective Leadership

Why do we call it “balanced” leadership? There are several aspects of effective leadership which require a balance of approaches rather than a singular focus on one leadership style or one area of improvement.

- Balancing when and how to maintain the status quo with when and how to challenge it is often the difference between effective and ineffective leadership (Waters & Cameron, 2007).
- Highly successful principals strike an appropriate balance between stepping up and taking charge as a directive leader versus stepping back and using a shared, distributed leadership approach (Waters & Cameron, 2007).
- Effective leaders also understand that they cannot focus simply on creating an appealing vision, or building a strong team and positive culture, or creating a learning organization committed to data use and professional growth, or driving change with clear goals and accountability. Instead, they must balance their attention to managing *all* of these functions in their school.

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*“Effective leaders understand how to balance pushing for change while at the same time protecting aspects of culture, values, and norms worth preserving. They know which policies, practices, resources, and incentives to align and how to align them with organizational priorities. They know how to gauge the magnitude of change they are calling for and how to tailor their leadership strategies accordingly. Finally, they understand and value the people in the organization. They know when, how, and why to create learning environments that support people, connect them with one another, and provide the knowledge, skills, and resources they need to succeed. This combination of knowledge and skills is the essence of balanced leadership.”*

Waters et al., 2003

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Areas of Responsibility	Average effect size (r)	This responsibility is the extent to which the principal . . .
Acknowledgement	.19	Recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures.
Adaptability	.28	Adapts his or her leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent.
Advocacy	.27	Is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders.
Celebrates	.24	Recognizes and honors individual accomplishments.
Change Agent	.25	Is willing to and actively challenges the status quo.
Communication	.23	Establishes strong lines of communication with teachers and among students.
Community	.25	Fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation.
Focus	.24	Establishes clear goals and keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention.
Ideals/Beliefs	.22	Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling.
Input	.25	Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions.
Inspires	.20	Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations.
Intellectual Stimulation	.24	Ensures that faculty and staff are aware of current theories and practices and makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school culture.
Involvement in Teaching & Learning	.20	Is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.
Knowledge of Teaching & Learning	.25	Is knowledgeable about current pedagogies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.
Monitors/Evaluates	.27	Monitors the effectiveness of school teaching and learning practices and their impact on student learning.
Protects	.27	Protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus.
Relationships	.18	Demonstrates awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff.
Resources	.25	Provides teachers with materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs.
Situational Awareness	.33	Is aware of the details and the undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems.
Structures & Routines	.25	Establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines.
Visibility	.20	Has quality contacts and interactions with teachers and students.

Note: Effect size is a correlation between leadership behavior and school-wide student achievement, shown as a percentage of a full standard deviation. A correlation of .25, for example, indicates that in schools where leaders enact this behavior effectively, student achievement is one quarter of a standard deviation higher than average.

## Professional Learning Program

The overarching imperatives of effective school leaders—being an intentional leader, establishing a clear focus on what matters most for student learning, inspiring and leading change, and cultivating a purposeful community—are the cornerstones of McREL’s Balanced Leadership for Student Learning professional learning program for current and aspiring principals, school leadership team members, and central office administrators who supervise schools.

The content of Balanced Leadership for Student Learning professional learning program is purposefully designed to support school leaders in deepening their understanding of the actions needed to achieve their school’s goals for student learning using the 21 responsibilities, the insights on change leadership, and ways to strengthen their school’s positive, purposeful culture and collective efficacy.

The program also includes resources and insights drawn from high-reliability organization principles, improvement science, evidence-based teaching practices, and the What Matters Most framework, and a greater focus on leadership’s impact on student learning.

The program is not an isolated one- or two-day “PD” event; rather it is delivered as a series of in-person sessions spaced out over the course of a school year, with participants completing self-paced reflection and application activities before and after each session. Participants are encouraged to attend together as school-level leadership teams whenever possible, to emphasize the power of shared leadership.

Participants will learn through the context of their own problems of practice or identified high-leverage needs. They’ll have choices for areas of emphasis and intersession application activities. They’ll be supported to focus on actions that will make the greatest difference for student learning, leveraging the Balanced Leadership responsibilities in ways that will advance the work of their schools, for their students. Balanced Leadership for Student

Learning is not professional learning that sits on the shelf; it is learning with action.

To date, more than 20,000 school leaders have participated in Balanced Leadership. In 2020, the **What Works Clearinghouse** reviewed evidence of the Balanced Leadership professional learning program’s effectiveness and rated

the program positively, assigning it a “**Tier 3 – Promising Evidence**” rating for improving the retention rate of school leaders. Additional formal studies are currently being proposed by McREL for further identification of additional outcomes, including effects on student achievement.

In addition to formal evidence, we also ask school leaders who were trained in Balanced Leadership to describe how they’re applying their learning at their schools. Multiple leaders tell us that Balanced Leadership informs *everything* about how they go about their work, regardless of the specific challenge of the day. They said the program helps them focus on the right work—the importance of maintaining an emphasis on teaching and learning—in the midst of everything else that goes on in a school community. One leader said that Balanced Leadership is “the ‘operating system’ that guides it all,” embedded in how they lead every day.

The screenshot shows the WWC Summary of Evidence for the McREL Balanced Leadership intervention. It includes a description of the program, a 'Reviewed Research' section for 'School Leadership' (March 2020), and a table of evidence metrics.

Outcome domain	Effectiveness rating	Studies meeting standards	Grades examined	Students	Improvement index

## How Well Does Balanced Leadership Align with Other Leadership Frameworks?

Balanced Leadership aligns well with key findings from other analyses of effective school leadership. For example, the **Wallace Foundation** has found four main categories of principal practices that produce positive school outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021):

- Focusing on high-leverage instructional activities. Engaging with their teachers on instructional practice and coaching, performance evaluation, and “the establishment of a data-driven, school-wide instructional program.” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. xv)
- Building a productive school culture and climate. “Practices that encourage a school environment marked by trust, efficacy, teamwork, engagement with data, organizational learning, and continuous improvement.” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. xv)
- Facilitating professional collaboration and learning communities. “Strategies that promote teachers working together authentically with systems of support to improve their practice and enhance student learning.” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. xv)
- Strategic management of personnel and resources. “Processes around strategic staffing and allocation of other resources.” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. xv)

**The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*** (2015) details 10 domains of school leadership that “research and practice suggest are integral to student success,” which are grouped into three main clusters:

- Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, and Community of Care and Support for Students.
- Professional Capacity of School Personnel, Professional Community for Teachers and Staff, Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community, and Operations and Management.
- Mission, Vision and Core Values, Ethics and Professional Norms, and Equity and Cultural Responsiveness.

When we compare Balanced Leadership with the Wallace’s and the NPBEA’s bodies of knowledge and frameworks, we find that they share many elements—perhaps not too surprising as each organization’s review of high-quality education research likely included studies the others had also analyzed.

The table on page 8 highlights (in green) areas of commonality between Balanced Leadership and 1) the Wallace Foundation’s findings on key behaviors of effective principals and 2) the National Policy Board for Educational Administration’s professional standards.

These frameworks and bodies of knowledge have broad areas of commonality and compatibility. From our perspective, content and learning drawn from each approach could be used to support and supplement high-quality professional learning to elevate school leadership effectiveness.

Wallace Foundation: Key Behaviors of Effective Principals	McREL: Balanced Leadership for Student Learning						
	<i>Guarantee challenging, engaging, and intentional instruction</i>	<i>Ensure curricular pathways to success</i>	<i>Provide whole-child student supports</i>	<i>Create high-performance school cultures</i>	<i>Develop data-driven high-reliability systems</i>	<i>Cultivate a purposeful community</i>	<i>Inspire and lead change</i>
Engaging in high-leverage instructional activities with teachers, such as teacher coaching, feedback, and evaluation, and establishing a data-driven, school-wide instructional program.							
Building a productive school climate marked by trust, efficacy, teamwork, and continuous improvement.							
Facilitating teacher collaboration and professional learning communities to improve instructional practice and student learning.							
Managing personnel and resources strategically.							

National Policy Board for Educational Administration: Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (main clusters)	McREL: Balanced Leadership for Student Learning						
	<i>Guarantee challenging, engaging, and intentional instruction</i>	<i>Ensure curricular pathways to success</i>	<i>Provide whole-child student supports</i>	<i>Create high-performance school cultures</i>	<i>Develop data-driven high-reliability systems</i>	<i>Cultivate a purposeful community</i>	<i>Inspire and lead change</i>
Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, and Community of Care and Support for Students.							
Professional Capacity of School Personnel, Professional Community for Teachers and Staff, Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community, and Operations and Management.							
Mission, Vision and Core Values, Ethics and Professional Norms, and Equity and Cultural Responsiveness.							

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**Learn to elevate your impact on student success, teacher efficacy, and community morale.**

**Balanced Leadership professional learning from McREL can help you:**

- Inspire your teachers, support staff, students, parents, and community with a shared vision and purpose for your school.
- Develop your school's positive, engaging learning culture and collective efficacy.
- Engage and empower your leadership team to define and drive success together.

**Learn more at:**

**[mcrel.org/balancedleadership](https://mcrel.org/balancedleadership)**

Contact us at 800.858.6830 or email [info@mcrel.org](mailto:info@mcrel.org)

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